

# Rhetoric and reality, contradictions in the midst of change: The UK government role at the 2010 NPT Review Conference

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## Introduction

In the UK, nuclear weapons have long been a contentious issue, with the UK's possession of its own nuclear arsenal attracting a great deal of opposition from the British public and proving to be a constant source of disagreement for politicians. Although the UK is a depository state for the NPT, the role and status attributed to nuclear weapons by successive British governments has prevented meaningful progress towards fulfilling the disarmament obligations designated by the treaty, and long-standing historical divisions have persisted. Most recently, two countervailing developments have been influencing the UK perspective and consequently presented an important backdrop to its position at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. These are: the perceived 'need' to renew the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system, and recognition of the importance of being seen to do more to actively contribute to the nuclear weapons free world that US President Barack Obama has publically endorsed.

UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown had also espoused the vision of a nuclear weapons free world in 2008<sup>1</sup>, around the time that opinion-formers in the UK were displaying a renewed understanding of the imperative for a fresh approach to the problem of nuclear weapons. Inspired by January 2007<sup>2</sup> and 2008<sup>3</sup> op-eds by Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry and George Schultz, in June 2008 the UK's 'Gang of Four' (Sir Malcolm Rifkind, Lord David Owen, Lord Douglas Hurd and Lord George Robertson) published their own op-ed in *The Times* of London "Start worrying and learn to ditch the bomb"<sup>4</sup>. This in turn played a role in encouraging a much higher level of engagement in nuclear weapons issues in the UK by senior parliamentarians, elder statesmen and women and former and serving high-ranking members of the military, and adding to the majority of the British public<sup>5</sup> already opposed to the renewal of Trident. The recent advancement of the debate is perhaps best illustrated by the creation in October 2009 of the Top Level Group of UK Parliamentarians for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-proliferation (TLG)<sup>6</sup>. Initiated by former Defence Secretary Des Browne (now Lord Browne) this group has high profile membership which comprises many if not all the former senior British Ministers of foreign affairs and defence, including serving members of the House of Commons (eg. Margaret Beckett, former Labour Foreign Secretary, and

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Brown, [Speech to the Indian Chambers of Commerce](#), New Delhi, 21 January 2008

<sup>2</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William J. Perry and George P. Schultz, [World Free of Nuclear Weapons](#), Wall Street Journal, 4 January 2007

<sup>3</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William J. Perry and George P. Schultz, [Toward a Nuclear-Free World](#) (web link is subscriber access only), 15 January 2008

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Hurd, David Owen, Malcolm Rifkind and George Robertson, [Start worrying and learn to ditch the bomb](#), *The Times*, 30 June 2008

<sup>5</sup> YouGov poll '[British Attitudes Towards the UK's International Priorities](#)', Commissioned by Chatham House, July 2010

<sup>6</sup> <http://toplevelgroup.org>

James Arbuthnot, the Conservative Chair of the Defence Select Committee) and the House of Lords (eg. Baroness Shirley Williams) over the last two decades, as well as former senior military chiefs such as Field Marshall Lord Edwin Bramhall and two former NATO Secretary-Generals, Lord George Robertson and Lord Peter Carrington. Formed with the explicit aim of advancing the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation agenda in the UK and internationally, in just over a year the Top Level Group has been extremely active in pushing for practical steps to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons and are indicative of a new wave of nuclear disarmament advocates hailing from the political mainstream. Traditionally regarded as a left-wing ideal, by the time of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, the necessity of nuclear disarmament was widely recognised within the UK political establishment and demands for a change to UK nuclear weapons policy could be heard from the activist margins to the corridors of power.

The general election of 6 May 2010, which coincided with the start of the Review Conference (3-28 May 2010), resulted in far-reaching political changes for UK policy across the board. As a consequence, international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation featured fairly low down on the UK political agenda at a crucial time for the NPT regime. The fact that the election resulted in a change of government further complicated matters and precluded the UK from performing an effective or progressive role at the RevCon. However, whilst nuclear policy questions have not featured significantly in UK general elections since the 1980s – a hangover the Labour Party's uneasy historical relationship with nuclear weapons and the adoption by Tony Blair's 'New Labour' of the defence postures of previous Conservative governments – the 2010 election proved to be quite different. Strong Liberal Democrat opposition to like-for-like replacement of Trident, boosted by the changed atmosphere around the debate as a whole, made the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system one of "the few strongly debated defence issues during the election campaign"<sup>7</sup>.

The increased salience of the Trident issue had been kick-started by the March 2007 parliamentary vote on the concept phase for renewal of Trident. Although Blair succeeded in making sure that Parliament pushed through the required 'yes' vote, it did so only with Conservative support after nearly a hundred Labour members of parliament voted against in the biggest rebellion since the beginning of the Iraq War. Both the Labour and Conservative parties imposed a three-line whip on their members – the strongest possible voting instruction which carries penalties for party members who go against it – thereby underlining the leaders' insecurity that if left to their own judgment, more MPs might have voted to delay the decision. Among the Labour MPs that defied their leadership, several Scottish junior ministers and ministerial aides, including the deputy leader of the House of Commons, chose to resign government jobs in order to vote against the whip.

As the first vote on plans to replace Trident, the Labour government preferred to portray its 'win' as the end of the matter. Tony Blair even went so far as to misinform Parliament by claiming that the NPT "makes it absolutely clear that Britain has the right to possess nuclear weapons"<sup>8</sup>. Whilst the timing of the UK general election itself was not conducive

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Harding, [General Election 2010: Trident policy the major flashpoint in subdued defence debate](#), The Telegraph, 6 May 2010

<sup>8</sup> [Tony Blair, in response to a question from Chris Mullin MP at Prime Minister's Questions: Hansard Official Reports \(Commons\)](#), 21 February 2007, Vol. 457, Col. 260

to a constructive role for the UK at the NPT, the period that preceded it succeeded in stimulating valuable debate around the UK's continuing possession of nuclear weapons. Though unrelated to the 2010 NPT RevCon, which was barely covered in British media, Trident remains high on the UK political agenda and questions of nuclear disarmament have since the election continued to hold a higher place than previously in mainstream discourse, not least because of the cost of replacement.

## **The Labour government's position going into the Review Conference**

In January 2008 then Prime Minister Gordon Brown had set out the UK's intended position as a key player in the 'global zero' game saying that the UK "will be at the forefront of the international campaign to accelerate disarmament amongst possessor states, to prevent proliferation to new states, and to ultimately achieve a world that is free from nuclear weapons."<sup>9</sup> Around the same time, other major speeches by UK government ministers had signalled the UK's support for reducing reliance on nuclear weapons and indicated its intention to make progress towards the goal of a nuclear weapons free world. These included a speech in June 2007 by then Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett at the Carnegie Endowment Nonproliferation Conference, in which she endorsed the Shultz, Kissinger, Perry and Nunn vision and indicated that the UK wanted to contribute as a "disarmament laboratory"<sup>10</sup>. Also of significance was a February 2008 statement<sup>11</sup> by then Defence Secretary Des Browne to the Conference on Disarmament in which he elaborated on the 'disarmament laboratory' concept, pledging to use the expertise in UK nuclear weapons laboratories to contribute to disarmament and verification whilst underscoring the need for simultaneous progress on both disarmament and non-proliferation.

Not long afterwards, Beckett's successor as Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, launched a Foreign Office study which resulted in the publication in February 2009 of *Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: Creating the Conditions for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, the first of three policy information papers produced by the Labour government in the run-up to the 2010 Review Conference. *Lifting the Nuclear Shadow* lent UK support to the goal of a nuclear weapons free world and although it stopped short of announcing any new initiatives by the UK, the tone had definitely changed: "We have made clear that when it will be useful to include in any negotiations the small proportion of the world's nuclear weapons that belong to the UK, we will be willingly do so"<sup>12</sup> the paper stated. A speech by Gordon Brown in March 2009 followed in which he announced that the UK "stands ready"<sup>13</sup> to reduce its own warhead numbers as part of broader negotiations involving the US and Russia. The *Road to 2010* plan appeared next in July 2009 – hot on the heels of Downing Street's publication of the *Building Britain's Future* paper which identified "driving forward a step-change on the nuclear non-proliferation and multilateral disarmament

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon Brown, [Speech to the Indian Chambers of Commerce](#), New Dehli, 21 January 2008

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Beckett, [Speech to Carnegie Endowment Nonproliferation Conference](#), Washington DC, 25 June 2007

<sup>11</sup> Des Browne, ['Laying the Foundations for Multilateral Disarmament' Speech to the Conference on Disarmament](#), Geneva, 5 February 2008

<sup>12</sup> [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Brown, [Speech on Nuclear Energy and Proliferation](#), London, 17 March 2009

agenda in 2010"<sup>14</sup> as one of its four priorities for "international leadership"<sup>15</sup>. The *Road to 2010* made strong linkage between the "reduction and eventual elimination"<sup>16</sup> of nuclear weapons and the expansion of nuclear power, but again did not announce any new steps towards disarmament by the UK. Then in September 2009, the FCO launched its *Nuclear 2010* guide to the NPT Review Conference with a digital media campaign which aimed to support UK government objectives for the Review Conference primarily by highlighting the importance of the RevCon and promoting positive coverage of the UK perspective<sup>17</sup>.

The UK government statements and papers described above set the scene for the Labour government's position going into the Review Conference. Core themes throughout were the UK's leadership role in promoting disarmament, the importance of nuclear energy and the concept of nuclear security as central to the UK's approach to non-proliferation. The UK's stated principal objective at the Review Conference was to strengthen the NPT regime which, despite the disappointment of 2005 and the lack of progress since 2000, the UK regarded as having "served the world well"<sup>18</sup>. The UK appeared to recognise the importance of the NPT not only internationally but domestically as well, as evidenced by a August 2009 US Embassy Cable in which UK Director of Defence and Strategic Threats Simon Manley is recorded as saying that the NPT has become a major political issue in the UK<sup>19</sup>. In a later cable, Mariot Leslie, Director General of Defence and Intelligence at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is quoted as saying that Gordon Brown wants to "refresh and refurbish"<sup>20</sup> the NPT. This sentiment was echoed by John Duncan, Ambassador for Arms Control and Disarmament, who emphasized that the UK saw itself in partnership with the US in wanting to "re-energise and give renewed focus"<sup>21</sup> to the regime and to "create a new constituency for action by empowering the centre ground against more extreme views"<sup>22</sup>. Strengthening the NPT was for the UK closely aligned with strengthening the non-proliferation regime. Key objectives were universal adoption of the IAEA Additional Protocol and effective mechanisms to address withdrawal from the treaty. With regard to non-compliance and notices of withdrawal, the UK's preferred option was prompt and effective action by the UN Security Council.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ['Building Britain's Future'](#), Downing Street, 29 June 2009

<sup>15</sup> ['Building Britain's Future'](#), Downing Street, 29 June 2009

<sup>16</sup> ['The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century'](#), Cabinet Office, 16 July 2009

<sup>17</sup> ['Nuclear 2010'](#), Digital Diplomacy online campaign, September 2009-May 2010

<sup>18</sup> UK Government 2010 NPT Review Conference core script, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Distributed to NGOs 1 March 2010

<sup>19</sup> Notes of a meeting between US Ambassador Susan Burk, Special Representative of the President for Nuclear Nonproliferation and UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office representatives, Wikileaks US Embassy Cable: [09STATE82013, Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty \(NPT\) Bilaterals](#), August 2009, para 5

<sup>20</sup> Mariot Leslie, Director General of Defence and Intelligence at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Notes of a meeting between US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Ellen Tauscher and UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband and UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office representatives, Wikileaks US Embassy Cable: [09LONDON2198, U/S Tauscher's Meetings with FS Miliband and other](#), September 2009, para 2

<sup>21</sup> [John Duncan's blog](#), 3 June 2010

<sup>22</sup> [John Duncan's blog](#), 3 June 2010

<sup>23</sup> ['The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century'](#), Cabinet Office, 16 July 2009, p 48

As the NPT RevCon drew closer and events unfolded on the global stage, Iran and North Korea were identified as key issues of consideration for the UK government. In particular, there was much concern around the Iranian nuclear issue, how it would play out over the RevCon period and how the issue would develop within the IAEA and in terms of sanctions. Similarly, North Korea was regarded as an important factor, as evidenced by the UK government's *Core Script* for the conference devoting an entire section to the circumstances surrounding the two countries' nuclear programmes and declaring that "Ensuring Iran and North Korea comply with their obligations is critical to maintaining the non-proliferation regime"<sup>24</sup>. As regards making progress on the establishment of a Middle East WMD Free Zone (WMD FZ) – something that was widely accepted as key to the success of the Review Conference – the UK positioned itself as holding the space for progress on this to happen.

Highlighting the UK's view of the RevCon as both part of a much longer process and integral to the successful revival of the non-proliferation regime, the Labour government declared that the 2010 conference was "a beginning, not an end"<sup>25</sup>, characterising it as a stepping stone from a "decade of deadlock to a decade of decisions"<sup>26</sup>. In recognition of the limitations of delegations led solely by national interests, the Labour government emphasised the need to work together to produce "an assertive and co-operative strategy"<sup>27</sup> owned by the entire international community. As part of their pre-RevCon rhetoric, they urged a "clean break"<sup>28</sup> from perceptions that everything is a "zero sum game"<sup>29</sup> and proclaimed the need for the barriers of the major groupings to be broken down and better cross-regional communication developed. According to the Labour government then, success for the UK would therefore be the modest but in some ways significant recognition by all parties of the different regional and global contexts and the necessity for a different approach from what had gone before.

In advance of the RevCon, the UK was generally regarded as the most progressive of the nuclear weapons states (NWS). Despite maintaining a nuclear capability equivalent to over 1500 times the explosive power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, the UK tried hard to position itself as a leader in terms of nuclear disarmament: "Since the end of the Cold War the UK has led the way, by reducing the capability and increasing the transparency of our nuclear defence."<sup>30</sup> Presenting itself as "ready to participate and to act"<sup>31</sup> – "as soon as it becomes useful for the UK arsenal to be included in a broader negotiation"<sup>32</sup> – the Labour government seemed to consider its position as one of already

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<sup>24</sup> UK Government 2010 NPT Review Conference core script, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Distributed to NGOs 1 March 2010

<sup>25</sup> [Nuclear 2010 – UK objectives for the Review Conference and beyond](#), Foreign & Commonwealth Office, September 2009, Insert 3 in a set of 9

<sup>26</sup> [Nuclear 2010 – UK objectives for the Review Conference and beyond](#), Foreign & Commonwealth Office, September 2009, Insert 3 in a set of 9

<sup>27</sup> [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009, p 3

<sup>28</sup> [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009, p 52

<sup>29</sup> [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009, p 52

<sup>30</sup> ['Nuclear 2010 – UK objectives for the Review Conference and beyond'](#), Foreign & Commonwealth Office, September 2009, Insert 5 in a set of 9

<sup>31</sup> Gordon Brown, [Speech on Nuclear Energy and Proliferation](#), London, 17 March 2009

<sup>32</sup> Gordon Brown, [Speech on Nuclear Energy and Proliferation](#), London, 17 March 2009

'doing' disarmament but holding off on complete disarmament until the "conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons"<sup>33</sup> have been created. According to documents made public by Wikileaks, UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband raised concerns about the credibility of the nuclear weapon states during a September 2009 meeting with US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Ellen Tauscher<sup>34</sup>. The UK positioning was therefore both reflective of a genuine concern to increase NPT credibility and a deliberate strategy of "public diplomacy",<sup>35</sup> to divert attention away from Trident renewal. As evidence of the UK's commitment to creating conditions for a nuclear-weapons-free world, the Labour government frequently highlighted its "groundbreaking work"<sup>36</sup> with non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) Norway and the NGO VERTIC on verifying nuclear warhead reduction. However, they continued to argue that any review of past efforts on disarmament should be assessed separately from the forward-looking commitments. In the months running up to May 2010 the UK delegation to the NPT was keen to stress that it wanted to secure P5 agreement on a "clear and credible forward plan on nuclear disarmament"<sup>37</sup> including benchmarks that would then be reviewed at a later date. To this end, the UK hosted a "confidence-building"<sup>38</sup> conference for P5 members in September 2009, which despite being a low-key event, short on any substantive agreements<sup>39</sup>, did serve to illustrate the UK's view of its wider role in keeping the P5 together. Moreover, at a meeting with NGOs after the RevCon had ended<sup>40</sup>, Ambassador Duncan was keen to stress that the UK had achieved one of their core aims for the conference, which was building unity amongst the P5.

The desire of the UK government to maintain a dividing line between actions of the past

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<sup>33</sup> For example, [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009, title & throughout

<sup>34</sup> Notes of a meeting between US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Ellen Tauscher and UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband and UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office representatives, Wikileaks US Embassy Cable: [09LONDON2198, U/S Tauscher's Meetings with FS Miliband and other](#), September 2009, para 21

<sup>35</sup> Notes of a meeting between US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Ellen Tauscher and UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband and UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office representatives, Wikileaks US Embassy Cable: [09LONDON2198, U/S Tauscher's Meetings with FS Miliband and other](#), September 2009, 'Nonproliferation and Public Diplomacy', paras 19 & 20

<sup>36</sup> '[Nuclear 2010 – UK objectives for the Review Conference and beyond](#)', Foreign & Commonwealth Office, September 2009, Insert 5 in a set of 9

<sup>37</sup> '[Nuclear 2010 – UK objectives for the Review Conference and beyond](#)', Foreign & Commonwealth Office, September 2009, Insert 5 in a set of 9

<sup>38</sup> [P5 statement on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation issues](#), P5 Conference on Confidence Building Measures Towards Nuclear Disarmament at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, 3 September 2009

<sup>39</sup> Only a [brief statement](#) was posted on the Foreign & Commonwealth Office website at the time (3 September 2009) noting that: "the P5 considered the confidence-building, verification and compliance challenges associated with achieving further progress toward disarmament and non-proliferation, and steps to address those challenges. They looked at ways to increase mutual understanding by sharing definitions of nuclear terminology and information about their nuclear doctrines and capabilities. They made presentations on enhancing P5 strategic stability and building mutual confidence through voluntary transparency and other measures."

<sup>40</sup> Notes of a meeting between NGO representatives and Ambassador John Duncan and FCO representatives on the 2010 NPT Review Conference, 16 June 2010

and aspirations for the future graphically illustrated the disparity between the Labour government's rhetoric of endorsing the vision of a nuclear weapons free world and its practice of continuing to possess and develop nuclear weapons – especially the Trident renewal decision aimed at maintaining a nuclear weapons capability until 2050. The UK has evoked the NPT's distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states to try to paper over its own policy contradictions, claiming that the replacement of Trident would be compatible with NPT obligations<sup>41</sup> since these do not require unilateral disarmament. First enunciated in its *Working Paper on Disarmament* submitted to the first session of the NPT Preparatory Committee in 2007, the government sought to argue that replacement was “retention, not modernisation”.<sup>42</sup> This 2007 working paper also laid the groundwork for distancing the UK's nuclear arsenal from the overall vision of a world without nuclear weapons by claiming that considerable reduction by the US and Russia will be necessary “before it will be helpful and useful to include the small fraction of the global stockpile that belongs to us”<sup>43</sup>. This perspective was later reiterated in the *Road to 2010* paper which stated that “once the strategic conditions are established that allow the US and Russia to make substantial reductions... it is likely to be appropriate for the UK to reconsider the size of its own stockpile of operationally available warheads”<sup>44</sup>

Having therefore dismissed the idea that its plans to replace Trident run contrary to the NPT, the UK also sought to absolve itself of responsibility for practical steps in reducing its stockpile of nuclear weapons. So although the UK's mood music before the NPT RevCon could be commended, its position as a nuclear weapon state (NWS) unwilling to fulfil its own disarmament obligations means that even the Labour government was unlikely to “accelerate disarmament”<sup>45</sup> very quickly. In the numerous UK government statements and papers on the subject that were produced in the run-up to the Review Conference, the goal of a world free from nuclear weapons was posited very much as an “eventual”<sup>46</sup> goal which “cannot be achieved overnight”<sup>47</sup> and is dependent on our “creating the conditions”<sup>48</sup>. This overused phrase ‘creating the conditions’ actually originated with the French, and was used to imply that progress was not the responsibility of the weapon states, so we should not expect too much! For example, *Lifting the Nuclear Shadow* identified international political developments as conditions

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<sup>41</sup> [The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century](#), Cabinet Office, 14 July 2009, para 5.38

<sup>42</sup> Working paper on disarmament submitted by the UK to the first session of the NPT Preparatory Committee, NPT/CONF.2010/PC.I/WP.59, Access via: <http://unclef.com/en/conf/npt/2007/documents.html>, 9 May 2007

<sup>43</sup> Working paper on disarmament submitted by the UK to the first session of the NPT Preparatory Committee, NPT/CONF.2010/PC.I/WP.59, Access via: <http://unclef.com/en/conf/npt/2007/documents.html>, 9 May 2007

<sup>44</sup> [The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century](#), Cabinet Office, 16 July 2009, p 38

<sup>45</sup> Gordon Brown, [Speech to the Indian Chambers of Commerce](#), New Delhi, 21 January 2008

<sup>46</sup> [The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century](#), Cabinet Office, 16 July 2009, p 3

<sup>47</sup> [The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century](#), Cabinet Office, 16 July 2009, p 3

<sup>48</sup> For example, [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009

that would need to be met before real progress on global zero could even be considered<sup>49</sup>. In relation to this, on the subject of a nuclear weapons convention or some kind of legally binding abolition treaty, aware of pressure from many UK disarmament NGOs, the Labour government's position was to reject the idea of a NWC at this time as "premature and potentially counter-productive"<sup>50</sup> when numerous other conditions necessary for abolishing nuclear weapons are not yet in place. In addition, whilst the *Road to 2010* paper shows the Labour government wanting to "lead"<sup>51</sup> global efforts for a successful NPT Review Conference, the absence of the word 'Trident' from the entire document illustrates that UK nuclear weapons possession was recognised to be in contradiction with this rhetoric.

The one instance, pre-RevCon, in which the government made vague noises about considering Trident in the context of the wider conversation on disarmament was during a September 2009 speech to the UN General Assembly when Prime Minister Gordon Brown said "In line with maintaining our nuclear deterrent I have asked our national security committee to report to me on the potential future reduction of our nuclear weapon submarines from four to three"<sup>52</sup>. Although this news was widely reported and welcomed in the UK media at the time, the publication via WikiLeaks in December 2010 of a US embassy cable<sup>53</sup> relating to September 2009 discussions between US officials and senior UK Foreign Office staff revealed that Brown's proposed reduction had come as a surprise to those working on disarmament and non-proliferation within the UK government who said that there was no actual change of British nuclear policy under way. If accurate, the leaked cable highlights the contradictions as UK Prime Minister seeks to be seen to be doing more on disarmament in ways viewed by officials as being at odds with the reality of the UK's actual nuclear weapons interests. Further efforts by the government to portray the UK as fulfilling its NPT commitment to disarmament include the oft-repeated statements: "Since the end of the Cold War, the UK has reduced the total explosive power of its nuclear forces by around 75%"<sup>54</sup> and the UK is "the only nuclear weapon state recognised under the NPT to have reduced its deterrent capability to a single system"<sup>55</sup>. These decisions, taken at the end of the Cold War, are less compelling when viewed against the background of a UK decision to procure new nuclear submarines and an arsenal of some 160 operationally available nuclear warheads,<sup>56</sup> with the aim of maintaining nuclear capabilities for a generation beyond the 2020s.

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<sup>49</sup> [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009, p 8

<sup>50</sup> [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009, p 34

<sup>51</sup> [Building Britain's Future: Key government deliverables for 2009/2010](#), 29 June 2010, p 15

<sup>52</sup> [Gordon Brown statement to the UN General Assembly](#), New York, 23 September 2009

<sup>53</sup> [US embassy cables: Brown's Trident announcement 'caught Whitehall by surprise'](#), [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), 8 December 2010

<sup>54</sup> [Lifting the Nuclear Shadow: creating the conditions for abolishing nuclear weapons](#), UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 4 February 2009, p 29

<sup>55</sup> [Britain's nuclear deterrent](#), UK Arms Control and Disarmament website, updated 29 August 2009

<sup>56</sup> "No more than 160 operationally available warheads" was the official figure given prior to the 2010 NPT Review Conference but the actual number of warheads was declared by the new coalition government to be significantly higher (225 including non-operational warheads) at the time of the Review Conference



Also central to the UK's attitude to the Review Conference and to disarmament and non-proliferation more broadly is its support for and indeed championing of nuclear energy. This aspect of the UK's approach comes across particularly strongly in its *Road to 2010* plan, with Prime Minister Brown himself proclaiming in the *Foreword*: "I am confident that we can deliver in 2010 a renewed and enduring grand bargain on nuclear power, that can underpin our security and prosperity in the decades to come." The paper also makes ardent claims about nuclear energy, saying it will play a part "combating climate change, global poverty, and energy shortages"<sup>57</sup> and describing it as "vital to the challenges of sustaining global growth, and tackling poverty"<sup>58</sup>. In the context of the Review Conference, the UK said it wanted to see a "full menu of complementary MNA [Multilateral Approaches to the Nuclear Fuel Cycle] proposals, including the UK-led Nuclear Fuel Assurance"<sup>59</sup>. Clearly regarding itself as a main player (together with France and Russia) in promoting peaceful uses of nuclear energy, the UK announced in its 2009 *National Security Strategy* that it was pledging £20 million towards establishing a National Nuclear Centre of Excellence. This idea was widely-touted by the Cabinet Office at the time but quietly dropped post-RevCon via a one liner in a Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) press release reporting on the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review. Another idea that was widely discussed in the run up to the Review Conference but disappeared without a trace later on was the notion of nuclear security as a "fourth pillar"<sup>60</sup> of the NPT. Whilst in the summer of 2009 the idea was very popular within sections of the UK government, by Christmas 2009 it had been ditched completely, mainly due to objections from non-aligned NPT parties who viewed this as emphasizing security of materials over the traditional three 'pillars' of non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament and nuclear energy.

Despite its inherent contradictions, the approach outlined by the Labour government aimed at least to present a semi-convincing narrative of the UK as a progressive and responsible nuclear weapons state (NWS) state, albeit one with a misguided emphasis on issues that served to maintain the nuclear status quo and distract from meaningful progress on nuclear disarmament.

## **The role of the UK during the Review Conference**

Having invested a great deal of time and energy in developing their policies in the run-up to the Review Conference, the UK delegation was not able to participate as fully as in previous RevCons because of the General Election on 6 May 2010. Unusually, this election carried the added complication of not delivering a clear result. Though New Labour was defeated, the UK electorate did not give the Conservative Party an overall majority, thereby making the formation of a new government a much more time-consuming affair. After several days of confusion, Conservative leader David Cameron

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<sup>57</sup> [The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century](#), Cabinet Office, 16 July 2009, p 3

<sup>58</sup> [The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century](#), Cabinet Office, 16 July 2009, p 5

<sup>59</sup> [Nuclear 2010 – UK objectives for the Review Conference and beyond](#), Foreign & Commonwealth Office, September 2009, Insert 6 in a set of 9

<sup>60</sup> [The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century](#), Cabinet Office, 16 July 2009, p 7

and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg negotiated first a basic agreement<sup>61</sup> and eventually a Coalition Agreement<sup>62</sup> to form – on 20 May 2010 – the UK’s first coalition in over 60 years. The final Coalition Agreement committed the new government to maintaining ‘Britain’s nuclear deterrent’ and specifically set out its intention to “immediately play a strong role in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference”<sup>63</sup>. In view of the Liberal Democrat opposition to the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system, UK nuclear weapons policy had to be considered as part of these difficult initial negotiations, and in a concession to the Liberal Democrats the final agreement stated that the renewal of Trident would be “scrutinised to ensure value for money”<sup>64</sup> with the Liberal Democrats left free to “continue to make the case for alternatives”<sup>65</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the election timing left the UK delegation to the RevCon essentially in limbo for half the conference, unable to properly participate until a new government could be formed. Since this proved to be Conservative-led, pro-military and largely pro-nuclear, along with underlying tensions because of different Liberal Democrat positions, the first noticeable shift in UK policy was demonstrated by the delegation’s sudden shift towards bolstering French positions in the NPT that the US and UK had previously been seeking to contain. Whilst Gordon Brown’s Labour government had at least embraced the rhetoric of a nuclear weapons free world, incoming Prime Minister David Cameron had a few days prior to his election stated “we should *always* have the ultimate protection of our independent nuclear deterrent”<sup>66</sup>. His use of the word ‘always’ not only betrayed a lack of flexibility but also underlined his unwillingness to examine the actual role and necessity for nuclear weapons. Therefore, it appeared that the new coalition government pulled back on the UK’s role as a progressive leader amongst the P5, shifting the balance of power among the nuclear weapon states back noticeably towards the naysayers.<sup>67</sup>

The UK’s change of policy led the delegation to make some retrogressive interventions including one related to the relevance of international humanitarian law to nuclear weapons. The UK and French delegations jointly challenged the language in the proposed action plan for nuclear disarmament, indicating that they wanted deletion of a paragraph relating to the humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons and the need to comply with international humanitarian law. Faced with strong support for the paragraph from non-nuclear weapon states, most notably Norway and Switzerland, the UK delegation then backtracked, saying they were not advocating its deletion, but were instead highlighting that care needed to be taken with this paragraph as international humanitarian law did not necessarily apply at all times. In the end the paragraph was adopted as follows: A (v): “The Conference expresses its deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, and reaffirms the need for all States to comply with international humanitarian law at all times.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> [Basic Agreement](#), UK Coalition Government, 12 May 2010

<sup>62</sup> [Coalition Agreement](#), UK Coalition Government, 20 May 2010

<sup>63</sup> [Coalition Agreement](#), UK Coalition Government, 20 May 2010, p 15

<sup>64</sup> [Coalition Agreement](#), UK Coalition Government, 20 May 2010, p 15

<sup>65</sup> [Coalition Agreement](#), UK Coalition Government, 20 May 2010, p 15

<sup>66</sup> Acronym’s *emphasis*: David Cameron, ‘The Leaders’ Debate’, ITV, 15 April 2010

<sup>67</sup> Rebecca Johnson, [Day 22: NPT President’s consolidated draft declaration](#), Acronym Institute 2010 NPT RevCon blog, 26 May 2010

<sup>68</sup> [Final Document](#), 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I), May 2010, Part I,

In another example that appeared indicative of new instructions from London, the delegation suddenly found fault with a paragraph that commended Britain's own verification initiative with Norway and VERTIC, saying they did not want this characterised as research on 'nuclear disarmament verification', only as research on 'nuclear warhead dismantlement'. The UK also aligned with France and hardened its positions relating to language on NATO's nuclear doctrines. Viewing these changes of stance, one is led to the conclusion that even if the core policies relating to the NPT remained in place, the UK delegation received post-election instructions to harden its position and resist further steps on nuclear disarmament. Such a shift was illustrated by its suddenly moving to side more with France than with the United States on issues relating to international humanitarian law and the importance of devaluing nuclear weapons in security doctrines, and hardened opposition to mention of further practical steps to achieve a nuclear weapons free world.

Although the Labour government had made clear its view in the run-up to May 2010 that "effective non-proliferation is a critical enabler for nuclear disarmament"<sup>69</sup>, during the RevCon there was a shift in emphasis to non-proliferation at the expense of disarmament. Earlier, the Labour government had been commended by the UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee, a cross-bench grouping of MPs, for its public recognition of the link between nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation<sup>70</sup>, but with the arrival of the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government such recognition was sidelined. Instead, the need for progress on disarmament was marginalised in favour of a narrower view of coercive non-proliferation, with the focus on countries such as Iran and North Korea.

Substantive issues aside, the new coalition government seemed to want to make a gesture towards transparency, in the hope that this would satisfy those calling for tangible action to fulfil Britain's disarmament obligations. Following the example of his US counterpart Hillary Clinton, and in line with UK's declared aim of increasing transparency, the newly appointed Foreign Secretary William Hague announced during the NPT Conference that the total number of nuclear weapons in the UK arsenal was 225. The effect of this transparency initiative was less than intended, since the number revealed was actually 65 weapons more than the previous government's figure of 160 operationally available warheads. (Hague for the first time disclosed the full total, assumed to comprise 65 'non-operational' warheads in addition to the previously declared 160.) The announcement was followed up when Alistair Burt, Under Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, briefly attended the RevCon and held a press conference to explain the significance of the transparency and confidence-building action. The government also announced that there would be a review of UK declaratory policy. This relates to the circumstances in which Britain would contemplate using nuclear weapons, and whilst the timing of this additional announcement may have suggested an openness to reducing the UK's reliance on nuclear weapons, when the review (in October 2010) was completed it

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Conclusions and recommendations for follow-on actions, I. Nuclear disarmament, A. Principles and objectives, para v (5), p 19

<sup>69</sup> UK Government 2010 NPT Review Conference core script, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Distributed to NGOs 1 March 2010

<sup>70</sup> Foreign Affairs Committee, [Fourth Report of Session 2008-09. Global Security: Non-Proliferation, HC 222](#), August 2009, p 9, para 14

came as no surprise that it merely brought the UK into line with the 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review.

During the course of the RevCon then, the election first made it difficult for the UK delegation to act decisively; and then when it received instructions, they were less progressive than the mandate it had developed over the previous months and years. Had there been policy continuity from the UK delegation, it is possible that some areas of the final declaration – particularly the action plan on disarmament – could have been stronger. Indeed, whilst France had been vigorous in pushing its objections in relation to disarmament during the Conference, there was little suggestion that it would block any consensus the other P5 states came to, so the UK about-turn allowed the more hard line French stance the increased leverage it needed to steer things its way. The general election therefore pushed the UK into the kind of close but counter-productive alliance with the pro-nuclear French positions last seen during the CTBT negotiations in 1994-1996<sup>71</sup>. Worryingly, this renewed coalescence between the British and the French has since then found expression in a new Nuclear Cooperation Treaty<sup>72</sup> with France which locks the two countries into joint work on nuclear warhead technology for the next 50 years.

## **Nuclear policy developments in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition**

As the new Coalition government got up and running after May, there appeared to be little interest in the NPT RevCon outcome, with the exception of a few parliamentary questions posed by members keen to see Britain make progress on the action points agreed at the conference.<sup>73</sup> As we move into 2011, more questions are likely to be raised as to whether the lack of momentum on matters such as the process for the 2012 conference on a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, as agreed by the RevCon, have been influenced by the absence of visible sustained efforts towards implementation by the key actors, including the UK, which has additional responsibilities as a depositary state.

The hiatus of interest over the NPT matters did not, however, extend to the UK political establishment's own nuclear weapons policy. Despite the coalition government's attempts to formulate a coherent policy on Trident, in the months following the general election the economic crisis and need to cut all government budgets, combined with long-standing political and philosophical differences over nuclear policy between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties resulted in increased debate over Trident renewal and the role of nuclear weapons in British and European security. Differences of

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<sup>71</sup> Rebecca Johnson, *Unfinished Business: the Negotiation of the CTBT and the End of Nuclear Testing*, UNIDIR, June 2009

<sup>72</sup> [UK-France Summit 2010 Declaration on Defence and Security Co-operation](http://www.number10.gov.uk), <http://www.number10.gov.uk>, 2 November 2010

<sup>73</sup> These included: Baroness Sue Miller of Chilthorne Domer: [Nuclear Non-Proliferation, House of Lords Debate, 9 June 2010, Column 639](#); Baroness Shirley Williams of Crosby: [Nuclear Non-Proliferation, House of Lords Deb, 9 June 2010, Column 641](#); Lord Hannay of Chiswick: [Nuclear Non-Proliferation, House of Lords Debate, 9 June 2010, Column 640](#); Mike Hancock (Liberal Democrat MP for Portsmouth South): [Nuclear Weapons, Written Questions, 23 June 2010, Column 235W](#)

perspective within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and among Conservative as well as Liberal Democrat MPs were brought into the open by a very public row sparked by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, over who would pay for the renewal of Trident. The Treasury began by insisting that, as a defence project, it should come out of MoD funds but pro-Trident Defence Secretary Liam Fox refused to accept this, arguing that the capital cost for Trident renewal should be funded, as in previous years, out of central government funds. According to Fox, Trident's inclusion in the defence budget would be "unaffordable"<sup>74</sup>. Clearly the high cost of replacement was – and remains – a major issue for the government. The previous Labour government had attached a price tag of £20 billion<sup>75</sup>, but Liberal Democrat researchers in 2006 calculated that Trident renewal would cost around £76 billion over its lifetime<sup>76</sup>, while Greenpeace put the overall cost even higher, at £97 billion<sup>77</sup>. These questions over funding for Trident renewal exposed deep underlying disagreements over the role and utility of British nuclear weapons, particularly when the Armed Forces were stretched to breaking point by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The widening of the cracks in the coalition position sparked more questioning in the British media and political circles of the need for Trident as well as an upsurge of interest in possible alternatives to the current system. There were several press reports<sup>78</sup> that the government was considering reducing the number of Trident submarines from four to three, a possibility that would likely require a change in the MoD's traditional Continuous-At-Sea-Deterrence (CASD) posture whereby at least one nuclear-armed submarine is required to be on patrol at all times. Two reports published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a highly respected think tank with close armed services connections, added weight to the case for abandoning CASD. The most recent of these was published in July 2010, written by Professor Malcolm Chalmers – a former senior adviser to Jack Straw and Margaret Beckett when they were foreign secretaries. Highlighting the fact that abandoning CASD could produce "significant financial savings"<sup>79</sup>, Chalmers argued that it was outdated and unnecessary following the end of the Cold War.<sup>80</sup> The *Financial Times* newspaper also ran a number of articles on CASD, including an editorial<sup>81</sup> actively urging the Prime Minister to ditch CASD and a piece by serving MP and former leader of the Liberal Democrats Sir Menzies Campbell calling for a fresh debate "not about perception but pragmatism"<sup>82</sup> in which Trident is properly scrutinised and alternatives considered.

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<sup>74</sup> Liam Fox, Speech at Farnborough Air show, Quoted by [Allegra Stratton in The Guardian](#), 21 July 2010

<sup>75</sup> [The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent](#), Defence White Paper CM6994, December 2006, p 7

<sup>76</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor, [New Trident system may cost £76bn, figures show](#), 21 September 2006

<sup>77</sup> [In the Firing Line](#), Greenpeace, 17 September 2009, p 18

<sup>78</sup> These included: Alex Barker and James Blitz, [Ministers consider fewer nuclear patrols](#), *Financial Times*, 12 September 2010 and [Into the storm](#), *The Economist*, 9 September 2010 and Nicholas Watt, [Liam Fox 'refuses anything but minor delay' over Trident replacement](#), *The Guardian*, 19 September 2010

<sup>79</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, [Continuous At-Sea Deterrence Briefing](#), RUSI, July 2010, p 1

<sup>80</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, [Continuous At-Sea Deterrence Briefing](#), RUSI, July 2010

<sup>81</sup> [Atomic question](#), Editorial, *Financial Times*, 12 September 2010

<sup>82</sup> Menzies Campbell, [Think again before Trident is all at sea](#), *Financial Times*, 16 September 2010

Debate over Trident was also amplified over the summer of 2010 due to the coalition government's commitment to a long-overdue review of defence policy. The previous Strategic Defence Review had been undertaken over 1997-1998 when New Labour first came to power. By contrast, the 2010 version was billed as a Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), and put together at break-neck speed in a record four months. Inevitably, this review was more cost-driven than strategic, and, like the 1998 Defence Review, tried to exclude from consideration matters pertaining to nuclear policy and NATO. Even so, there was still time for discussion on the possible outcomes of the review, most notably centred around rumours of a delay to the 'main gate' procurement decision for building new submarines to carry UK nuclear weapons into the 2050s.

Nuclear policy proved more contentious than usual during the party conference season (September-October 2010), particularly for Liberal Democrats. Such was the level of dissent amongst party members that as the Liberal Democrat annual conference approached, a YouGov poll of party members<sup>83</sup> revealed that a mere 7% of Liberal Democrats supported the coalition government's plans to replace Trident. In a move that served to strengthen Liberal Democrat voices against Trident in the coalition government, an emergency debate on the future of Trident led to the conference passing a motion<sup>84</sup> calling on Liberal Democrat ministers to push for Trident to be included in the SDSR, for the opportunity costs of not replacing Trident to be made explicit and for consideration to be given to alternatives. Rumours of delay were finally confirmed on 19 October 2010 when the SDSR<sup>85</sup> was published, with the news that the main gate decision would be delayed until 'around 2016' – later than originally planned. Whilst this allows more time for Trident opponents to try to get the replacement programme cancelled, the government clearly hopes that there will be a more favourable economic climate in which to commit irrevocably to billion pound expenditure contracts with BAE Systems for building the new submarine fleet. At present it is envisaged that such a delay might mean up to a four-year delay bringing the first new submarine into service, although this could probably be mitigated since the original schedule did not take into account changes in the industry. The SDSR announced further reductions to the nuclear arsenal, bringing the aggregate stockpile down to 180, with a pledge to keep the number of operational warheads at no more than 120, with 40 rather than 48 deployed per submarine.<sup>86</sup> It also brought UK declaratory policy into line with the US Nuclear Posture Review by stating that countries in non-compliance with the NPT could be the target of UK nuclear weapons.<sup>87</sup>

While it might appear that the delay in the Trident renewal timetable and the reduction in warhead numbers illustrate Britain's commitment to the NPT, the moves were motivated primarily by financial considerations. The main gate delay – provided contracts signed within the 'initial gate' procurement period do not irreversibly tie the UK in to financing commitments that later preclude cancellation of the renewal project –

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<sup>83</sup> [You Gov poll on Trident replacement](#), Commissioned by Greenpeace, 14 September 2010

<sup>84</sup> [Emergency Motion: Trident – carried, www.libdems.org.uk](#), 22 September 2010

<sup>85</sup> [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), Cabinet Office, 19 October 2010

<sup>86</sup> [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), Cabinet Office, 19 October 2010, Chapter 3: The Deterrent

<sup>87</sup> [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), Cabinet Office, 19 October 2010, Chapter 3: The Deterrent

may offer respite enough for the UK to consider the future of Trident within the framework of its international obligations. The fact remains, however, that Trident was officially excluded from the SDSR, which implies that the government has not yet grasped the contradiction between its own clinging to nuclear possession for the foreseeable future, and the imperatives of non-proliferation and disarmament in the NPT.

## **Scotland's challenge to nuclear business as usual**

While governments in London debate (or try to avoid debating) nuclear policy, Trident is a more significant issue in Scottish politics. This is particularly relevant since the UK's entire nuclear weapons system is based in Scotland.<sup>88</sup> As noted above, a majority of Scottish Members of the UK parliament from all represented parties voted against Tony Blair's government in the March 2007 vote on Trident renewal, which saw several Scottish junior ministers and ministerial aides resign government jobs rather than vote according to the three-line whip imposed by the Labour Party. A few months later, the Scottish National Party (SNP) replaced Labour as the majority party in Scotland, having been elected "on a pledge that they would work towards removing nuclear weapons from Scotland"<sup>89</sup>. A month later, in June 2007, the Scottish Parliament overwhelmingly supported a motion calling on the UK Government to reconsider the decision to renew Trident, thereby emphasising the strength of feeling on the matter amongst Scottish decision-makers.<sup>90</sup> Following from this clear opposition to Trident renewal, the Scottish Government held the first ever Summit for a Nuclear Free Scotland on October 22 2007, three weeks after the end of the *Faslane 365*<sup>91</sup> year of grassroots mobilising and nonviolent blockading actions at the Trident deployment base at Faslane. This summit led to the convening of the first ever Scottish government working group on 'Scotland Without Nuclear Weapons', which was chaired by the Minister for Parliamentary Business, Bruce Crawford MSP, and comprised eminent representatives of Scottish civic society, including Professor William Walker of the University of St Andrews, and religious, trade union and nongovernmental leaders, including NPT expert Dr Rebecca Johnson.

As momentum gathered, an international conference on "Trident and International Law: Scotland's Obligations" was held in Edinburgh on 3 February, 2009, with participation by Members of the Scottish Parliament, eminent Scottish and international legal scholars and practitioners, including from the International Court of Justice, as well as civil society representatives and activists. The Conference deliberations were fed into the Working Group, which issued its report in late 2009. Responding to the Working Group report, the Scottish Government endorsed the majority of its findings, noting "the irrelevance of

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<sup>88</sup> The UK's nuclear weapons system is based on the Clyde river, some 35 miles northwest of Glasgow: over 200 warheads (of which 160 are deemed 'operationally viable') are stored at the Royal Naval Armaments Depot (RNAD), Coulport, and the four Vanguard class nuclear submarines that carry the US-made Trident missiles are home-ported at Faslane, near Helensburgh.

<sup>89</sup> Angus Robertson MP, SNP Spokesperson on Foreign Affairs and Defence in the UK (Westminster) Parliament, Opening address to the International Conference "Trident and International Law: Scotland's Obligations" held in Edinburgh on 3 February 2009

<sup>90</sup> The motion passed by 71 votes to 16 with 39 abstentions

<sup>91</sup> [Faslane 365](#) was a one year continuous peaceful blockade of the Trident nuclear weapons base at Faslane from 1st October 2006 to 1st October 2007, by a wide range of local, national and international groups from all sections of UK civil society.

nuclear weapons in today's society and the case for removal of nuclear weapons at an early date"<sup>92</sup>. Highlighting the "moral, economic and strategic arguments against the renewal of Trident"<sup>93</sup>, the Scottish Government clearly stated its opposition to "the use, threat of use and possession of nuclear weapons and to the UK Government's commitment to replace the current Trident system at an estimated cost of up to £100 billion (total cost of replacement and operation over 50 years) and strain on public spending"<sup>94</sup>. Of special significance was the Scottish government's recognition that "Scotland has a special position as a nation within a State, opposed to the presence of nuclear weapons on its territory and the implications for its devolved responsibilities"<sup>95</sup>. Reflecting the challenges posed by the UK government's retention of control over all defence and foreign policy matters under the devolution settlement (enshrined in the 1998 Scotland Act), the Scottish Cabinet took a very cautious view on the legal issues raised by the Working Group. Although it acknowledged the usefulness of examining "a range of competing arguments around the legality of nuclear weapons"<sup>96</sup> it decided "that the legality of the presence of Trident in Scotland remains governed in law by the binding decision of the High Court of Judiciary in the leading Scottish authority on the issue, Lord Advocate's Reference No. 1 of 2000"<sup>97</sup>.

## **UK Nuclear Policy after 2010: Conclusions and Reflections**

The Scottish government's special responsibilities as the deployment site for the UK's nuclear weapons system mean that the strong Scottish opposition to Trident renewal may prove increasingly problematic for the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Liberal Democrats in the Scottish parliament all voted against Trident renewal and some were at the forefront of getting the issue raised at the party's annual conference in September 2010. While financial considerations were clearly uppermost, the recent SDSR decision to delay the signing of irrevocable contracts for the submarines to carry the successor nuclear system suggests continuing nervousness on the part of the coalition government to push ahead with Trident renewal in the face of widespread questioning of UK nuclear weapons policy. Furthermore, given the UK's status as a Nuclear Weapons State within the NPT and its Article VI commitment to disarm, domestic developments such as these could have an important bearing on the UK's future role in the NPT.

The 2010 NPT Review Conference came at a crucial time for the disarmament and non-proliferation regime and it was widely recognised that success at the conference was essential to uphold the basic credibility of the nonproliferation regime. In the run-up to the Review Conference, the UK's Labour government recognised the widespread desire among non-nuclear countries to see more tangible progress towards a nuclear weapons

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<sup>92</sup> [The Scottish Government's response to the Scotland without Nuclear Weapons Working Group Report](#), 18 November 2009, p 5

<sup>93</sup> [The Scottish Government's response to the Scotland without Nuclear Weapons Working Group Report](#), 18 November 2009, p 5

<sup>94</sup> [The Scottish Government's response to the Scotland without Nuclear Weapons Working Group Report](#), 18 November 2009, p 5

<sup>95</sup> [The Scottish Government's response to the Scotland without Nuclear Weapons Working Group Report](#), 18 November 2009, p 5

<sup>96</sup> [The Scottish Government's response to the Scotland without Nuclear Weapons Working Group Report](#), 18 November 2009, p 7

<sup>97</sup> [The Scottish Government's response to the Scotland without Nuclear Weapons Working Group Report](#), 18 November 2009, p 7



free world. Brown's government therefore embraced President Obama's Prague rhetoric and displayed a recognition of the need to be seen to be 'doing disarmament' even though their fixation with Trident meant undermining many of the efforts to adopt more concrete disarmament initiatives to fulfil the NPT. However despite some carefully laid groundwork by the Labour government, the unfortunate timing and unusual result of the UK general election proved to be a set back for UK leadership in the NPT context. As illustrated in the final week of the 2010 Review Conference and in subsequent months, the actions of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government are now bringing the UK more into line with the French, long viewed as the most active among the P5 to resist initiatives aimed at delegitimising nuclear weapons and paving the way for a world without nuclear arms.

The contradiction between the UK's NPT Article VI obligation to disarm and its current plans to go ahead with renewing the Trident nuclear weapons system remains a source of contention and debate. Indeed, the coalition government's November 2010 signing of a UK-France nuclear cooperation treaty under which the two P5 members will collaborate on nuclear warhead technology for the next 50 years would further entrench UK possession of nuclear weapons. Domestic questioning of nuclear weapons policy rightly offers signs of hope as we move forwards. But the failure of the UK government to properly assess the role Trident plays in its security policy and the determination of key Conservatives such as Defence Secretary Liam Fox to ensure Trident replacement goes ahead will undermine efforts to carry forward the nonproliferation regime and implement agreements reached at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, including the "need for further progress in diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in security policies"<sup>98</sup>.

This analysis of recent developments in UK nuclear policy underscores the significance of domestic political considerations in the international context, something that seems likely to be of increasing relevance as we consider the UK's role in disarmament and non-proliferation beyond 2010. After the RevCon, concerns over the Trident nuclear weapons system re-emerged as a major issue for the coalition government with heightened political debate in media, military and political circles over the value and utility of Trident amid strong Liberal Democrat opposition to like-for-like replacement. The government's subsequent delay of the main gate decision until after the next general election is expected to result in Trident becoming a major issue in the next election, which will have to take place by May 2015. Already, there is media speculation that the Labour Party under its new leader, Ed Miliband, "may re-consider its support for replacing Trident".<sup>99</sup> As the recent debates over who should pay for Trident renewal exposed, leadership in British armed forces as well as majority public opinion are less and less convinced of the need for nuclear weapons, though they remain deeply concerned about the threats of nuclear proliferation and terrorism. As a consequence, there could be real potential for diminishing UK reliance on Trident and changing nuclear weapons policy in the coming years.

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<sup>98</sup> [Final Document](#), 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I), May 2010, Part I, Article VI and eighth to twelfth preambular paragraphs, para 86, p 13

<sup>99</sup> [Labour may rethink Trident replacement – Ainsworth](#), BBC News, 4 November 2010

