

Do You Agree that Acquiring a Replacement for Trident from the United States will Perpetuate Britain's Role as America's 'poodle'?

Written by Dave Hudson

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DAVE HUDSON, JAN 12 2008

With the government's pledge to give a decision regarding the possible renewal or replacement of the Trident system within the lifespan of this current Parliament – 2010 at the latest – the debate surrounding Britain's use of nuclear weapons has been rekindled. This debate has changed little over the years, with similar discussion taking place before the acquisition of the Polaris system in the 1960s, and the original purchase of the Trident system in the 80s. Britain's dependence on the United States – in terms of nuclear relations – since the repeal of the McMahon act in 1958 has been, and remains, considerable. The current direction of British foreign policy has led many commentators to refer to Britain as America's 'poodle', an analogy also used to describe the personal relationship between the two executives, Tony Blair and George Bush. Recent events such as British support for the US-led invasion of Iraq have done nothing to diminish such opinions – and with Trident up for renewal and the replacement of Trident looking more than likely to be of United States origin, the 'poodle' theory seems unlikely to be dismissed. But is it fair to argue that, in acquiring a replacement for Trident from the United States, Britain's role as America's 'poodle' will be perpetuated or should Britain look to move from the role of loyal chorus to that of candid friend? (Cook, November 12 2004). In this essay I will address these issues and determine whether Britain's role as 'poodle' would be perpetuated by an American replacement for Trident. In order to do this I will first give a brief history of the Anglo-American nuclear relationship.

Nuclear collaboration between the two nations began towards the end of World War Two in 1942 under the Manhattan Project which successfully developed and detonated three nuclear bombs, two of which were used against the Japanese mainland. With success in World War Two and sole possession of nuclear weapons America however reversed its policy of nuclear cooperation with Britain and cut off all help and access to R&D of nuclear technology by passing the McMahon act of 1946. This left Britain in a difficult position: the power, both politically and militarily, of nuclear weapons had been effectively demonstrated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and made nuclear weapons very desirable for a British government who wanted a real input in the post-World War Two world. There was limited interaction between the United States and Britain in terms of nuclear technology for the duration of the McMahon act, although the British did successfully develop their own nuclear weapons, testing one in 1952.

The first real signs of a rejuvenation of the 'special relationship' came with the Macmillan government in the wake of Suez. America agreed to the stationing of 60 Thor nuclear missiles on British soil under a dual key system, and even bigger steps were to be made in the repeal of the McMahon Act in 1958 which paved the way for a new age of Anglo-American cooperation. The first real example of which was a visit to Washington in May 1960 in which Macmillan brokered a deal with Eisenhower for the supply of American air launched Skybolt missiles and a gentleman's agreement that gave Britain an option on Polaris missiles, once fully developed, in return for a US Polaris base at Holy Loch and an early-warning spy station at Fylingdales in Yorkshire. (Dobson, 1995: 120). This agreement between Eisenhower and Macmillan, although seen as the first real step towards the level of nuclear collaboration enjoyed by America and Britain today, was also a major crisis in the history of the US-UK special relationship. For many this episode was "fresh evidence that the special relationship was a snare and a delusion" (Turner, 1994: 166).

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The so called Skybolt 'crisis' was caused by a lapse in communication between the two governments. When Macmillan and Eisenhower made the agreement on British procurement of Skybolt the missile was still in the research and development stage and had yet to be purchased by the Pentagon. Macmillan had staked all on Skybolt and rapidly cancelled the British Blue Streak project, Britain's own attempt at a nuclear ballistic missile that had become obsolete even before production, in favour of the American Skybolt system. The problem came when Washington, now represented by President Kennedy pulled the plug on Skybolt leaving the British without a credible nuclear deterrent. This was potentially devastating for Britain and undermined Duncan Sandy's defence White Paper report which outlined the future commitments of British forces, a report that heavily relied on nuclear weapons as a force multiplier. Macmillan played his part well and Britain emerged from the 'Skybolt' crisis with the far superior Polaris system, a deal which many regarded as "almost the bargain of the century" (Dumbrell, 2006: 174) and as David Ormsby-Gore, the British ambassador to Washington, commented – a "compromise which no other ally could have achieved" (Dumbrell, 2006: 174).

The Polaris deal marked a high point in relations between the two powers but also arguably denoted the start of Britain's complete dependence on America with regard to all things nuclear. For whilst with Polaris Britain enjoyed an operational independence, in truth the so called independent deterrent is seen as what Dan Plesch calls a "political myth" (Booth in Oxford Research Group, 2006: 84). Britain was reliant on the US for the Polaris missiles, their servicing and the information for their targeting and guidance – therefore Polaris was not an independent system. The decision to upgrade Polaris to Trident in the 1980s was met with the same debate in Britain as with Polaris but the same decision was taken by the British government who believed a British nuclear deterrent was needed. The initial decision to replace Polaris with Trident was made by Prime Minister Callaghan and President Carter but followed through by Thatcher and Carter and then later with Thatcher and Reagan. The deal was brokered on very similar terms to that of Polaris with Britain coming away with another "bargain", the only difficulty arising from the American decision to upgrade the original Trident system (the C4 system) and not at first offering the same option to Britain. Yet Margaret Thatcher's personal relationship with her counterpart Reagan enabled the British to also acquire the improved D5 system. The Trident deal did much to revive the "special relationship" with many drawing comparisons to the good old days of Jack and Mac, but Trident as with Polaris also raised the old questions of sovereignty and independence. Many were concerned with the issue of Britain's dependence on America which is neatly summed up by Denis Healey: "If we continue with the Trident programme, we risk crippling our expenditure on conventional forces for no real military advantage and with some serious political disadvantage, which can be summed up as a period of prolonged and humiliating dependence on the United States." (Quoted in Dumbrell, 2006: 182).

The argument that Trident represents an independent nuclear deterrent is I believe a flawed one. Like with Polaris it can be argued that with Trident, Britain at best enjoys an operational independence but this is far from complete independence. Although the United States does not provide the British with nuclear warheads, the British Trident nuclear arsenal is almost entirely dependent on US technology and support. Trident is an American missile system. The UK does not manufacture or purchase its own Trident missiles but leases them from the US missile stock. The US also supplies the following: highly enriched uranium to fuel British Trident submarines; the storage, assembly and servicing of the missiles; US facilities at Kings Bay, Georgia, for the preparation for entry into service of British Trident missiles and their refurbishment during each major submarine refit; and the information for the targeting and guidance of the missiles. The British deterrent is, therefore, not an independent one (Barnaby in Oxford Research Group, 2006: 8). One of the main arguments against the renewal of Trident is exactly this: British subservience to American policy. Many believe that the renewal of Trident with another American system will just increase the perception of Britain as America's 'poodle'. Clare Short outlined in the recent Commons debate on Trident that if Britain were to acquire an American replacement, "we have to send them back to be repaired and serviced, so we can retain the weapons only if we are always on good terms with the US. That means that we do not have an independent foreign policy, as has been demonstrated so disastrously in Iraq. That has humiliated our country and helped to make the world more dangerous by dividing it more deeply and undermining international law." (Short, 14 March 2007). Short goes on to speculate that in replacing Trident with an American system Britain can look towards another 30 – 40 years of playing 'poodle' to America.

The 'Poodle Theory' was born out of Britain's close relationship with America (in particular the personal relationship

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between Tony Blair and George Bush). It follows, therefore, that because of these close ties – and perhaps dependence – in the areas of diplomacy, intelligence and defence, America has deprived Britain of the ability to oppose it. The myth of the “special relationship” has accordingly condemned Britain to the rank of mere vassal in the American empire. The decision by the Blair government to support America in the invasion of Iraq meant that Britain was acting against the wishes of the UN, Britain’s key European partners and a majority of British and European public opinion. This decision made by Blair has sparked much debate and criticism over Britain’s position in relation with the US. Former British ambassador in Moscow Rodric Braithwaite has argued that “such a relationship ... has become a liability, reducing Britain’s freedom of manoeuvre in foreign policy to the point that we are now widely seen as incapable of having a mind of our own” (Azubuike, 2005: 127). Braithwaite points to Blair’s apparent helplessness as being down to Britain’s diplomatic, military and intelligence cooperation with and dependence on the US. “Hence, inside the British establishment, the special relationship is now supported only by prime ministers, submariners and codebreakers [who] have been loath to contemplate any rift with the US.” (Azubuike, 2005: 127). Harsher criticism of Blair’s decisions comes from journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft who states that the ‘sad truth’ behind Blair’s support of Washington “is that Blair is the last victim of an illusion which has long bedevilled British policy, the myth of the ‘special relationship’”. “Blair’s motive (over Iraq) was his conviction – his only real foreign policy – that he must support the US at all times” (Azubuike, 2005: 128).

However, the US-UK special relationship is built on far more than just nuclear cooperation, and it follows then that British dependence on America for Trident should not affect the independence of British foreign policy. While it is argued that the close relationship has imposed constraints on British diplomacy as Britain seems unwilling to openly confront or antagonise America, one only has to look at the example set by the Wilson government over the Vietnam War. “Even when the United States deeply desired to enlist a UK military contribution in Vietnam in the late 1960s, there was never any suggestion of threatening abrogation of the Polaris sales agreement as a lever to overturn UK refusal” (Quinlan, 2006: 632). But when Harold Wilson was pressured for some show of British ‘boots’ in Vietnam however small in number, he refused. Vietnam was one of America’s darkest chapters and some show of support for the cause from Britain would have gone a long way in both helping an ally and strengthening the US-UK relationship, but at no point did the American administration threaten to cut off nuclear support on which Britain was so dependent. Although the Vietnam episode did nothing to improve transatlantic relations, no severe damage was done. This begs the question, what would America have done if Tony Blair had sided with Europe and refused to send any British troops to Iraq? This would have been a move in which Blair would have greatly benefited at home and abroad. The answer is probably very little. If we take Vietnam as an example – would the Anglo-American relationship have suffered? This is where the ‘poodle theory’ appears to be too simplistic in nature. Does Britain actually have to follow the lead of America? It was in Blair’s interest to stand firm against America over Iraq, a move that would have greatly enhanced his and Britain’s status, so then why did he side with Bush? Was it a case of the ‘poodle’ theory, where Britain sought to avoid public confrontation with America; instead, it actively supports it openly while manipulating and trying to influence in private? (Azubuike, 2005: 129). In part, yes, I do think this was a reason, but I believe much more rested with the personal conviction of Tony Blair. When asked about his belief in Bush’s actions Blair replied “it’s worse than you think, I believe in it” (Kampfner, 2003: 279). For me, it is this reason that really determines Britain’s current relationship with America – the personal conviction of the British Prime Minister. Whilst the ‘poodle’ theory does help to demonstrate British dependence on America, I feel it lacks in evidence as to why Britain allies itself so closely – the reason is much more complex than Britain having ‘no other option’. It is, in the case of Blair and Bush, the firm beliefs held by both executives that Britain and America are fighting a just cause. It can then be argued thus: that the Prime Minister was neither a mindless poodle of President Bush nor a sudden convert to Washington’s aggressive anti-terror campaign. In fact considering the risks to his political fortunes at home and the dangers to British relations with the EU “there was no doubting that Blair was acting out of principle and is motivated by sincere conviction.” (Azubuike, 2005: 128). As Blair commented himself “the price of British influence is not, as some would have it, that we have, obediently, to do what the US asks. I would never commit British troops to a war I thought was wrong or unnecessary. Where we disagree, as over Kyoto, we disagree. But the price of influence is that we do not leave the US to face tricky issues alone...” (Azubuike, 2005: 132).

Now that I have determined that Britain’s leadership can and does act independently of American wishes, can the same be said for British policy as a whole? The replacement of Trident with a new American system is seen by many commentators as the next era in British subservience to American foreign policy, as Clare Short put it in an article in

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the Independent “should we continue to act as a fig leaf for the US and pretend that a nuclear weapon supplied and serviced by them somehow makes us a significant power?” (The Independent, 1 November: 2005). Short adds that with Trident “It’s purely a pretence. It’s a joke. We are completely dependent on getting the missiles from the US and having it serviced there. So it absolutely locks us into the poodle role with the US.” (The Guardian, 22 June 2006). But what ‘control’ does America actually possess over Britain in terms of influencing our foreign policy? Certainly America enjoys considerable influence in UK affairs, but just because we use an American system for our deterrence does not make Britain another American state. What could America do to Britain? Well the fear is that in going ‘against’ the US, America could simply demand its missiles back and cease nuclear cooperation with Britain, therefore effectively destroying the British nuclear deterrent. But this would not be in the interest of any American government apart from the fact that “Washington would be irritated to lose a loyal vassal” (MccGwire, 2006: 640). It would also lose out in the broader strategic sense and lose a key (nuclear) member of NATO, resulting in severe political fallout for America. As Macmillan, and later Wilson, asserted, Britain was of more use to America as an ally opposed to as a satellite state (Dumbrell, 2001: 136). This argument is true today. Even if in the future British policy differed dramatically from that of America I believe there would be little resulting fallout. This however seems very unlikely as American and British foreign policy look bound together for the foreseeable future, with both countries’ determination to fight the “war on terror’ which has no real end in sight.

To conclude I feel that any replacement for Trident is bound to come from the US, for there are no real viable alternatives. The renouncement of nuclear weapons, while considered by many as the correct course to take will not happen when we face such an uncertain future: “Just because your house has not burned down, it does not mean that you stop insuring it.” (Rifkind, 9 March 2007). The political climate is simply too unstable for any government to go further down the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) route and completely give up nuclear weapons. As for the alternatives to Trident replacement, it is more than likely that none will be as viable or as cost effective as the American’s offer and with defence spending such a scrutinized area any unnecessary spending is extremely unlikely. This, combined with Britain’s desire to safeguard the ‘special relationship’, makes a purchase of a nuclear weapons system from any state other than America seems almost unthinkable. But will an American replacement for Trident perpetuate Britain’s role as a ‘poodle’? Clare Short holds this opinion stating that a Trident replacement will only “cement us to the US” (Short in Oxford Research Group, 2006: 59). This is a view held by many observers and one of the biggest reservations for the renewal of Trident. I however do not take this view. I am of the opinion that the Trident renewal will have little effect on America’s hold over Britain. I do not dismiss the notion of the ‘poodle’ theory as it does have a valid grounding in helping to understand the ‘special relationship’ that exists between the United Kingdom and United States. Nor am I naive enough to dismiss American influence over Britain and its political leadership, but in the case of the current British government and the Prime Minister I believe that Britain has not followed American wishes blindly and behaved like an American ‘poodle’. The current foreign policies of both nations, undoubtedly shaped by the events of September 11, are bound together not because that is what America wants but because that is what both political leaders believe to be the right course to pursue. While there will be those who see an American replacement for Trident as a clear indication of British subservience to American policy, I however do not. British acquisition of an American placement will undoubtedly influence future British governments but I do not feel that it will force Britain to bend completely too American wishes. As Blair stated himself when facing the charges of being Bush’s obedient lapdog: “if the President had not acted on Iraq, I would have urged him to do so.” (Quoted in Azubuike, 2005: 132). Although UK governments have on occasions conceded too much to American influence, the decision to send UK troops to Iraq was nevertheless a sovereign decision. The procurement of an American replacement for Trident will not change this and will therefore not perpetuate Britain’s role as America’s poodle.

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