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Revealed - new facilities for building new nuclear warheads

After revelations in this week's Observer, serious questions must now be asked about the British government's plans for future development of the UK's nuclear weapons.

- Is Britain carrying out or has it already carried out any work on the possibility of fitting new nuclear warheads on to the existing Trident system?
- Is Britain assisting the US in its design work on 'low-yield' nuclear devices?
- Will Britain have any participation or input into the 'advanced warhead concept teams' being established at the US nuclear weapons establishments?
- How was the decision taken to invest billions of pounds in to new infrastructure and facilities at Aldermaston?
- Will the Government publicly repudiate the statements of Defence Secretary Hoon on the use of the UK's nuclear weapons?

Introduction

Atomic Weapons Establishment plc arose out of a decision by the Ministry of Defence to turn over the management of Britain's three nuclear warhead plants to a Government Owned/Contractor operated (GOCO) arrangement in the early 90's. It operates on two sites - Aldermaston and Burghfield - both in Berkshire. Aldermaston conducts the design and development of all British nuclear warheads and manufactures the majority of components that go into these warheads. Burghfield's primary task is to receive nuclear warhead components and assemble them into an operational warhead, it also disassembles warheads that are being decommissioned or have been returned for servicing.

Changes in nuclear doctrine

Over the last few years there has been a steady trickle of information about possible changes in British nuclear doctrine. Over the last six months this trickle has turned into an avalanche that indicates a monumental shift in the British nuclear doctrine held since these weapons were first acquired almost fifty year ago.

US Nuclear Doctrine

In March of this year extracts from the new US review of its nuclear doctrine were leaked¹. The review, or NPR as it has become known, marked a fundamental shift in why and how US nuclear forces could be used from what was previously described as a purely 'defensive weapon of last resort' to an 'offensive' weapon that could be used pre-emptively.

The review called for a 'new mix' of nuclear, non-nuclear and defensive capabilities, such as national missile defence, to form a 'New Triad.' According to the review, the U.S. will now deliberately plan nuclear strikes for a range of contingencies that can then be adapted quickly without the current up to two-day delay to retarget U.S. operationally deployed nuclear forces. Contingencies for which a nuclear strike may be felt necessary include an Iraqi attack on Israel or its neighbours, a North Korean attack on South Korea, or a military confrontation over the status of Taiwan. Unexpected contingencies described in the review are 'sudden and unexpected security challenges like the Cuban Missile Crisis' or an opponents surprise unveiling of an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.

The NPR warns that today's US nuclear arsenal is too old fashioned and inflexible for modern military needs. It calls for new capabilities to be developed *'to defeat emerging threats such as hard and deeply buried targets, to find and attack mobile and relocatable targets, to defeat chemical or biological agents and to improve accuracy and limit collateral damage.'* It calls for the development of nuclear weapons to achieve these capabilities through *'extensive research and timely fielding of new systems'* and that they are *'imperative'* if the New Triad is to be a *'reality.'* [emphasis added]

To do this and in a throwback to the Cold War 'Advanced Warhead Concept Teams' are to be established inside each of the three nuclear weapons laboratories to assess evolving military requirements, investigate options, and work out what is or is not possible.² These teams are to look at existing warhead designs and develop new ones with the work in some cases going beyond theory and involving the construction of components and warheads that could be placed in the active stockpile.³

Britain's response

Shortly after the leaking of the US Review, UK Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon chose not to distance himself from it when he appeared before the Defence Select Committee on March 20. He stated that he was *'absolutely confident that in the **right** conditions we would be willing to use our nuclear weapons.'* [emphasis added]

Four days later on the Jonathan Dimbleby programme he went further by insisting that the nuclear option could be taken pre-emptively.

*'Let me make... clear the long standing British government policy that if our forces – if our people – **were threatened** by weapons of mass destruction we would reserve the right to use appropriate proportionate responses which might... in extreme circumstances include the use of nuclear weapons.'*⁴ [emphasis added]

In answer to a written question on April 29, just to make sure we were all clear about British nuclear policy he stated that *'A British government must be able to express their view that, ultimately and in conditions of extreme self defence, nuclear weapons would **have** to be used.'*⁵ [emphasis added]

This change in tack follows US intent to issue a new national security strategy later this year where words like *'pre-emptive'* and *'defensive intervention'* are intended to be used to describe US nuclear weapons policy.⁶

Revamping Britain's nuclear weapons infrastructure?

In ten days time a redevelopment plan for Aldermaston will be made public that will involve over three billion pounds of investment in facilities at the site. This is twice as much as was spent on Aldermaston redevelopment as part of the original Trident programme.

² Statement of John A Gordon, Under Secretary for Nuclear Security and Administrator, National Nuclear Security Administration, US Department of Energy before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, 14 February 2002

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Rt Hon Geoff Hoon, MP, Secretary of State for Defence, speaking on the Jonathan Dimbleby programme, ITV, 24 March 2002

⁵ Official Report, 29 April 2002, col 665W

⁶ "Bush developing military policy of striking first", Washington Post, 10 June 2002, pA01

If this plan were to proceed it would mean the construction of a brand new nuclear weapons assembly line at Aldermaston that would enable Britain to construct and support future generations of nuclear weapons - the question being, are preparations being made to ape the US and construct British low-yield 'tactical' nuclear warheads to be retrofitted onto the existing Trident system?

US/UK nuclear weapons co-operation

For over forty years co-operation between the US and UK on nuclear weapons design, development, production and deployment has been extensive.

Currently there are four staff in the British Embassy on Washington, DC whose sole task is to facilitate this bilateral co-operation. In addition there are four staff from Aldermaston at the US nuclear weapons laboratories to '*assist with the technical development of facilities of mutual interest.*'⁷ There are two at Los Alamos, one at Sandia with the other at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

Over the last four years the number of visits by British personnel to discuss various aspects of US/UK nuclear weapons co-operation has remained consistent at around two hundred or on average almost one visit every working day of the year.⁸

Furthermore there are currently sixteen working groups in existence that cover subjects like 'nuclear weapons engineering'; 'nuclear weapon code development'; 'nuclear warhead physics'; 'manufacturing practices'; and 'computational technology'. Last year there were 120 meetings in the US and 61 in Britain connected with these groups.⁹

Conclusion

Britain's aggressive stance on nuclear weapons usage, the extensive ongoing nuclear weapons co-operation with the US and the imminent announcement of a massive investment in the nuclear weapons infrastructure at Aldermaston will send a clear signal to the world - Britain is to remain in the nuclear bomb building business for decades to come.

This brings in to question the truthfulness of a statement made by Geoff Hoon to Parliament recently on Britain's commitment to achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

'The United Kingdom regards the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime. We remain firmly committed to the Treaty and also to the Final Document agreed at the Non Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in 2000. We are recognised as the most forward-leaning of the Nuclear Weapon States.'¹⁰

With the United States actually working on the design of low-yield nuclear weapons or 'bunker busters' that will go beyond theory and involve construction of warheads that can be deployed it would be unbelievable for Britain not to be assisting, given the close co-operation that exists between them. Such weapons blur the distinction that previously existed between conventional and nuclear war.

⁷ Official Report, 22 January 2002, col. 734W

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Official Report, 25 January 2002, col 116W

¹⁰ Official Report, 26 March 2002, col. 850W

The clear intent by the US is to make nuclear weapons more politically acceptable to be used as a weapon of war and not as a weapon of extreme last resort. The question is – will Britain follow? From the evidence so far the answer appears to be – yes.

Greenpeace demands that Prime Minister Tony Blair:

- publicly retracts the statements made on British nuclear weapons policy by Geoff Hoon;
- that he calls a halt to all nuclear weapons co-operation with the U.S.;
- that he cancels all development plans for the Atomic Weapons Establishments, and; that he instructs his Defence and Foreign Secretaries to concentrate their political and diplomatic efforts into achieving a world free