

Championing internationalism in the post-coronavirus world Labour CND RESPONSE

Q2: UK defence policy: realism vs illusion

In the post-Covid world our primary objectives must be to defend the people of Britain from the real threats we're facing and to contribute any special skills and knowledge the UK may have acquired to helping make the world a safer, more stable and more peaceful place. To decide how to do so, we must first determine what the greatest threats to UK and global security really are.

Real threats

The UK government's National Security Risk Assessment 2015, the most recent assessment, highlighted seven areas of risk to the UK:

- terrorism
- cyber-attacks
- instability in Middle East and elsewhere
- public health pandemics
- natural disasters
- the activities of transnational criminal organisations and terrorist groups, such as people and drug trafficking, and
- the use of weapons of mass destruction.

The first six were deemed Tier 1 dangers, that is immediate and present. The last was defined as a Tier 2 threat, a longer-term danger most likely taking the form of chemical or biological attacks against the British mainland or UK military forces abroad.

A public health pandemic materialised quicker than anyone could have anticipated, and a coordinated approach across government has included the MoD and defence industry. MoD support to government and public services includes:

- military personnel available to drive oxygen tankers
- defence science labs helping test for coronavirus
- assistance with repatriation flights and
- helping construct emergency hospitals like the one built in the ExCel Centre, London.

Defence contractors such as Babcock, Airbus, Rolls Royce, and BAE Systems are participating in the Ventilator Challenge UK Consortium to make ventilators for the NHS.

Trident: what's the use?

Trident has no part to play in overcoming the Covid19 pandemic or any of the other threats identified by the NSRA. Indeed, the MoD are already considering scenarios in which Trident itself becomes a security risk – as a target for terrorists or cyber strikes.

Former Labour Defence Secretary Lord Des Browne has highlighted the danger of cyber-attacks on weapon systems IT, warning that Britain cannot be confident it could survive such an attack. We know that underwater drones are being developed, capable of detecting our 'silent' submarines.

Accidental deployment of nuclear weapons is also a risk, as is the possibility of military activity inadvertently involving nuclear materials or accidents at nuclear facilities. There are well-documented records of accidental nuclear events around the world, including 21 incidents in Britain alone between 1950-2000 serious enough to merit a rating on the IAEA's International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale.

The pro-Trident lobby claims the possession of nuclear weapons is sufficient to dissuade predatory powers or rogue states from engaging Britain in a military confrontation. As another former Labour Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon admitted when commenting on a DPRK missile launch, nuclear weapons are not a deterrent if there is no willingness to use them.

Why are we spending £205 billion over Trident's lifetime for a weapon system that does not protect us from any of the risk government experts say we're facing, and in fact increases the risks we face?

An unanticipated lesson from Covid19

The UK's response to the coronavirus crisis has provided us with an unanticipated lesson. The participation of defence contractors in the Ventilator Challenge Consortium has demonstrated the practicality of a just transition from nuclear weapon production to socially useful and sustainable alternatives.

Labour should drive this home by establishing a Shadow Defence Diversification Agency in line with TUC policy, to show that the high-paid, skilled jobs that the unions seek to protect are not dependent on military production.

ENDS

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