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РОССИЙСКОЙ АКАДЕМИИ
НАУК**

125009, МОСКВА, МОХОВАЯ УЛ., 11-3
ТЕЛ.: +7(495)692-10-51/629-45-07
ФАКС: +7(495)629-92-96
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125009, MOSCOW, MOKHOVAYA STR., 11-3
TEL.: +7(495)692-10-51/629-45-07
FAX: +7(495)629-92-96
WWW.IERAS.RU

Working Paper №5, 2016 (№19)

Brexit, Russia and the fate of the British nuclear deterrent

Elena Ananieva

Candidate of Philosophical Sciences, Head of Center for British Studies IE RAS

Britain's decision to modernize its nuclear forces is likely to provoke international debate on nuclear non-proliferation and the role of the British nuclear deterrent within NATO.

The British Parliament's recent decision to modernize its nuclear forces in the wake of [Brexit](#) is momentous not only for European security but also for global nuclear security as a whole. The nuclear weapons of the United Kingdom play an essential part in [NATO](#)'s nuclear deterrent system, and any decisions taken by London in that sphere will affect Russia, too.

On July 18, the British parliament voted on the modernization of the Trident nuclear system. The program was approved by 472 votes to 117. The cost of the modernization is estimated at approximately \$40 billion.

Margaret Thatcher's government in the early 1980s acquired the Trident system to replace the Polaris system. Operational since the 1990s, the Trident system consists of three components: submarines, missiles and warheads. Each submarine is capable of carrying up to eight Trident missiles equipped with up to 40 warheads.

The present generation of submarines will exhaust its resources by the end of the 2020s. Since the development of a submarine takes 17 years, the work must be started right away. Modernization implies replacing the Vanguard-class nuclear submarines by new, Successor-class ones.

Formally, the government is not obliged to put the matter before the parliament, but the very act of soliciting parliament's opinion has been politically significant.

The voting was supposed to take place next fall, but former Prime Minister David Cameron and new Prime Minister Theresa May advanced the voting to July 18 to take advantage of a crisis in the Labour Party. The faster timetable sharpens the contradictions between its leader Jeremy Corbyn and the party's parliamentary leaders on this issue.

Theresa May declared that, after Brexit, Britain needed to demonstrate its adherence to NATO

As she was putting herself forward as a candidate for the post of Conservative leader, Theresa May [declared](#) that, after Brexit, Britain needed to demonstrate its adherence to NATO. In her first parliamentary speech as Prime Minister, she [said](#) that for Britain to abandon its nuclear weapons in favor of idealism would be "gross irresponsibility" and a "reckless gamble" in the face of the "very real" threat from Russia and [North Korea](#).

Moscow has responded with regret to the the new prime minister's declaration that Russia poses a real threat to Britain. Russian President Vladimir Putin's press secretary has pointed out that Russia serves as one of the main guarantors of global security including the sphere of nuclear security. Moscow's position, which is quite clearly formulated, is "for all parties to very actively participate in the process of nuclear non-proliferation." Meanwhile, such decisions by a nuclear power encourage the reverse process.

In this regard, it is very important to understand what is behind the British Parliament's decision and what are the prospects for the implementation of the plan of the country's nuclear forces modernization.

How the UK political parties stand on nuclear modernization

The Labour Party is split over the issue. Its leader Jeremy Corbyn is an ardent supporter of unilateral nuclear disarmament. In the fall of 2015 he declared that he would never press the "nuclear button." During the pre-vote debate Corbyn [stated](#) that each warhead was eight times more powerful than the atom bomb that killed 140,000 people in Hiroshima and was capable of destroying 1 million people.

He pointed out that the possession of the deterrent weapons had not prevented the rise of the [Islamic State of Iraq and the Greater Syria \(ISIS\)](#), atrocities in Yemen, Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, war crimes in the Balkans, or the genocide in Rwanda. However, the majority of the Labour parliamentary group supports the modernization.

A free vote revealed profound differences in the party torn apart by the upcoming election of its leader. Owen Smith, candidate for the post of Labour leader and a former member of the Movement for Nuclear Disarmament, supported the modernization because the world had become more insecure, according to him.

As to the Scottish National Party (SNP), a decision to relinquish nuclear weapons was adopted by a party conference in 2015. Indeed, at the Scottish independence referendum, the

SNP talked about removing British nuclear weapons from its territory. In February, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon participated, along with Corbyn, in demonstrations against nuclear weapons, and on the eve of the voting, 36 demonstrations took place in Scottish cities.

Many opponents of Corbyn believe that his public renunciation of the use of nuclear weapons cast doubt on the very effectiveness of the British deterrence threat.

Modernize or not?

The debate over the modernization of the Trident system started in December 2006, when it was unanimously supported. Since 2007, under the Labour government of Gordon Brown, the members of parliament voted for Trident modernization. However, in October 2010 Cameron's coalition government postponed it. The reason was that the Labour's coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, proposed to save budget funds by retaining a "minimal yet credible" deterrent.

The opponents of modernization have pointed out that, in contrast to the Cold War period, there is no threat from the Soviet Union, and thus, Britain has no need for nuclear weapons designed for the Cold War era

This led to the disputes over the cost of modernization. This question is very sensitive especially in the context of reduced public spending on social needs. The opponents of modernization have pointed out that, in contrast to the Cold War period, there is no threat from the Soviet Union, and thus, Britain has no need for nuclear weapons designed for the Cold War era. Moreover, nuclear weapons are useless as they cannot be applied, are incapable of countering the threat of international terrorism, are ineffective against cyberwarfare, and can become vulnerable to drones.

Part of the Labour Party, the SNP and the Green Party contend that Britain's place in the UN Security Council does not depend on the country's possession of nuclear weapons since, initially, the U.S. was the only state to possess them. They say that Britain should observe its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty while any modernization would encourage proliferation. Some representatives of the Conservatives are worried that the modernization expenses might lead the decrease in the funding of the conventional weapons.

Britain's independent nuclear forces

British prime ministers have claimed that the country has independent nuclear forces, since an order to open fire does not require authorization from the U.S. Neither does Britain use American satellites or codes. Technologically, though, the United Kingdom depends so much on the U.S. that Trident is not really an independent system. The submarines receive maintenance in a port in the American state of Georgia, and the warhead components are also produced in the U.S.

Thus, by relying on sea-based strategic nuclear weapons and "voluntarily" giving up the aircraft component of the deterrent, the British actually made themselves dependent on the U.S. for their security.

Great Britain believes that the goals of [nuclear deterrence](#) or a nuclear strike (including a tactical one) on the enemy can be solved, in the context of Britain, through reliance on the sea-based nuclear deterrent alone. Britain retained its sea-based nuclear weapons due to the deployment of American nuclear munitions and aircraft on its territory and other NATO countries.

Today Britain has the smallest nuclear arsenal among the five nuclear powers. Moreover, financial and political difficulties forced London to reduce what its nuclear arsenal. In 1998, the Strategic Defense Review put forward a plan implying, among other things, a reduction of the number of warheads from 300 to less than 200. Today, there are 162 of them.

NATO's nuclear capabilities threaten Russia

In February 2016, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter declared that Britain should retain its nuclear weapons system as an important part of the deterrent structure of NATO. From the U.S. perspective, Britain's nuclear weapons help it to play an important role in the world, maintain the "special relationship" with the U.S., and "punch above its weight."

"We depend upon the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom depends on us, that's part of the special relationship," he [said](#). "We build joint strike fighters together, we build Trident missiles together."

However, this military-technical cooperation is a violation, on the part of the U.S., of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (enacted in 2011). According to Article XIII of the Treaty, the U.S. and Russia have no right to transfer strategic offensive arms to third parties.

Furthermore, the U.S., Great Britain and France, united in the framework of NATO armed forces, already possess nuclear superiority. In this context, modernization of the nuclear potential of any of the countries leads to a growth of tensions on the part of the opponent, which in this case, could be Russia.

Thus, Britain's nuclear arsenal, while not being the largest, is an essential component of the NATO nuclear deterrent, which the Kremlin sees as a threat to Russia. Taking into account that the U.S. continues building its [European missile defense](#), Moscow cannot but be concerned about the British nuclear weapons modernization plans.

Date of initial release: July 22, 2016.

This publication can be downloaded at: <http://en.instituteofeurope.ru/publications/analytics/>

Originally published at: <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/brexit-russia-and-fate-british-nuclear-deterrent>