

**JANUARY 2016**

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**TRIDENT**

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DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

**MOTION:**

**“THE UK SHOULD  
RENEW TRIDENT”**

# ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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## KEY TERMS

[Ballistic missile](#)

[Cold War](#)

[Mutual Assured Destruction](#)

[Trident](#)

[Unilateral disarmament](#)

[Vanguard Class](#)

[Weapon of mass destruction](#)

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

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The United Kingdom is one of nine countries that possess nuclear weapons [Ref: [Arms Control Association](#)]. Nuclear weapons are a weapon of mass destruction [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], and have been used just twice in conflict, by the United States of America in the bombing of Japanese cities Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945, during the Second World War. The two bombs used on the Japanese killed nearly 200,000 people [Ref: [History.com](#)] and since those early atomic bombs, nuclear weapons have become many times more powerful [Ref: [Test Tube News](#)] and their destructive capabilities, and implications for humanity, remain a concern for many. The UK was the third country in the world to develop its own nuclear weapons, after the USA and the then USSR, and has been committed to a nuclear weapons programme ever since. But for as long as the UK has had nuclear weapons, there has also been a campaign against their existence, with the UK's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament being formed in 1957 [Ref: [CND](#)]. The movement gained considerable support in the early 1960s and then again in the 1980s. But as the UK's current nuclear weapons programme, Trident, comes closer to the end of its working life, the question of nuclear disarmament has once again entered mainstream public debate. The 2015 Conservative Party election manifesto, pledged to renew Trident as the nation's 'insurance policy' against hostile attack [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. The vote on renewal is expected in the House of Commons this year, with questions about the costs, benefits and ethics of the UK retaining nuclear weapons once again being debated. Arguably conceived both as offensive weapons for military dominance, as well as a defensive deterrent, the continued existence and ongoing development of "the most dangerous weapons on earth" [Ref: [UNODA](#)], remains a source of national and international contention. Is a nuclear deterrent still fundamental for Britain in the 21st century? Or is it immoral, outdated and obsolete, incapable of addressing the threats that we face today? Should the UK renew Trident?



# THE TRIDENT DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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## What is Trident?

Trident has been the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons programme since 1994. It is a nuclear missile system housed on four 'Vanguard class' submarines [Ref: [Royal Navy](#)], with one of the four submarines always on patrol to give the UK round-the-clock nuclear deterrence [Ref: [The Week](#)]. Each submarine can carry up to 16 ballistic missiles [Ref: [Merriam-Webster](#)], with each missile capable of carrying up to 12 nuclear warheads, having a range of some 7,500 miles - their destructive power estimated to be the equivalent of eight Hiroshimas [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. The current Trident submarines are due for replacement by the 2020s, although this may be delayed as the debate on whether to replace Trident continues [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. The 2015 Strategic Defence Review showed that the Ministry of Defence's estimated costs of replacing the Trident system with a new generation of nuclear submarines, called 'Successor class', would be £31bn, up from a projected cost of £25bn five years ago [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Downing Street has said a parliamentary vote will be held on the decision as to whether to replace Trident's submarines, predicted to take place at some point this year.

## Still vital to national security?

Supporters of the UK retaining its nuclear programme put two clear reasons forward: deterrence and international authority. Supporters argue that having a nuclear programme enhances national security by serving as a deterrent to potential aggressors. As a Times editorial stated: "If this country retains its deterrent...any would-be aggressor will know that an attempt at nuclear blackmail will not be credible... Nuclear deterrence

ensures that no crisis involving Britain can end in checkmate or escalate beyond our control" [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Deterrence is based on the idea that no state would attack another if they possessed nuclear weapons, as the potential costs of doing so (a possible nuclear response) would be too great for the aggressor nation. In that sense, argues John McTernan, former political strategist to the Labour Party: "They are being used all the time. The effectiveness of the deterrent is that it deters" giving as an example the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 where "senior Soviet military figures were clear: they could have overrun West Germany easily with conventional weapons, but they were held back by the nuclear threat. It may be an uncomfortable, ugly fact. But it's fact." [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] Indeed, the Cold War [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], which the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of, was defined by the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], where a stalemate existed between the two key superpowers of the era, the USA and USSR. "Why" explains one writer "would one nuclear state attack another when it knows retaliation would be inevitable? You would have to be, well, mad." [Ref: [IB Times](#)] Rather than a nuclear deterrent being outdated, many argue that Trident is actually needed more than ever, because "whilst nuclear crises and stand-offs are close to unthinkable in the short-term, they could return in the future, as American hegemony declines and nuclear technology spreads amongst middle powers like Iran, North Korea or Pakistan." [Ref: [New Statesman](#)] Many also argue Trident continues to give the United Kingdom greater influence internationally [Ref: [IB Times](#)]. Being a nuclear power increases the UK's standing in the world, it is claimed, giving it a seat at the 'top table' along with the USA, China and Russia. All the other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council are nuclear powers [Ref: [UN](#)],



# THE TRIDENT DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED

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demonstrating that nuclear armaments and great power status are closely aligned. Thus, from this perspective, if the UK were to scrap its nuclear programme unilaterally [Ref: [Collins Dictionary](#)], it would risk losing influence on a number of wider international issues. Highlighting this point, post-war Labour MP and founder of the National Health Service Nye Bevan argued in 1957, that unilateral nuclear disarmament would send future Foreign Secretary's "naked into the conference chamber" [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

## Old fashioned, immoral and ineffective?

Critics of the UK's Trident system, and of nuclear deterrents more broadly, argue that the programme is immoral, costly and ultimately ineffective. Some ask why the current nine countries with nuclear weapons feel they have the "prerogative to possess these ghastly bombs, each capable of obliterating many thousands of innocent civilians" and that they "ought to be condemned in the strongest terms for possessing these indiscriminate, immoral weapons." [Ref: [Guardian](#)] The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament argue that the weapons are "immoral, potentially genocidal and strategically irrelevant in the face of the realistic threats we face today" [Ref: [CND](#)], and that any use of nuclear weapons would be a breach of international law, in causing unavoidably huge numbers of civilian casualties because of their inability to destroy 'selectively' [Ref: [CND](#)]. Beyond the moral argument, critics maintain that Trident has become unjustifiably costly, and with it "estimated to cost £100bn over a 30-year lifespan", in an era of austerity we should consider its benefit to the nation overall, against other spending needs [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. As well as this, others suggest that it fails in its

fundamental aim of enhancing UK national security. Gulf War veteran, retired Major-General Patrick Cordingley, says that Trident is a "folly" we bear as part of our 1958 alliance with the USA [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] and that "the money we spend on our nuclear deterrent would be better spent on creating armed forces that could be really effective — with the best equipment and armaments possible — to protect British interests around the world and for conflict resolution." [Ref: [The Times](#)]. CND also assert that nuclear weaponry is irrelevant when the: "Government's National Security Strategy identifies international terrorism, cyber-attacks and natural hazards as greater threats than nuclear war." [Ref: [CND](#)] Similarly, former head of the armed forces Field Marshal Lord Bramall has stated that: "Nuclear weapons have shown themselves to be completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently face or are likely to face, particularly international terrorism." [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] And far from weakening Britain's role in the world, notes writer David Shariatmadari, "A country giving up its own would be a rare and shining thing: an altruistic act in world affairs." [Ref: [Guardian](#)] On balance, does "Britain's nuclear deterrent contribute to a peaceful world order" [Ref: [The Times](#)]? Or is Trident merely "about diplomatic clout, global posturing, domestic grandstanding and huge sums of public expenditure" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]?



## ESSENTIAL READING

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[Nuclear Weapons: who has what at a glance](#)

*Arms Control* October 2015

[A guide to Trident and the debate about its replacement](#)

*BBC News* 30 September 2015

### FOR

[Britain's missing nuclear debate](#)

Jonathan Leader Maynard *New Statesman* 30 October 2015

[The case for renewing Trident is irrefutable](#)

John McTernan *Telegraph* 2 September 2015

[Nuclear needs](#)

*The Times* 9 April 2015

[Election 2015: What the Trident nuclear deterrent is and why it matters to UK security](#)

Shane Croucher *International Business Times* 9 April 2015

### AGAINST

[Trident is not a deterrent, so let's get rid of it](#)

Patrick Cordingley *The Times* 11 November 2015

[It's time to leave the nuclear hall of mirrors](#)

David Shariatmadari *Guardian* 5 October 2015

[Jeremy Corbyn's straight talking on Trident should be applauded](#)

Simon Jenkins *Guardian* 1 October 2015

[Trident is useless. That's why we must debate its renewal](#)

Richard Norton-Taylor *Guardian* 28 September 2015



## BACKGROUNDEERS

[How powerful are modern nuclear weapons?](#)

*Test Tube News* 22 November 2015

[Labour's patriotic duty is to back Trident](#)

Liz Kendall *The Times* 22 November 2015

[Pros and cons of Trident: MoD and Osborne in 'tug of war'](#)

*The Week* 12 November 2015

[Trident and international law](#)

*Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* November 2015

[Once again and for Britain's security, Labour MP's must back the renewal of Trident](#)

Michael Fallon *Conservative Home* 21 October 2015

[Any support for Trident is about politics, not defence](#)

Diane Abbott *Guardian* 1 October 2015

[Why Trident could decide the next general election](#)

Richard Dannatt *Telegraph* 30 September 2015

[The 10 best Labour conference speeches](#)

Andrew Rawnsley *Guardian* 25 September 2015

[Buying Trident would weaken British defence](#)

Gideon Rachman *Financial Times* 13 April 2015

[We need a nuclear deterrent more than ever](#)

David Cameron *Telegraph* 3 April 2013

[Nuclear weapons must be eradicated for all our sakes](#)

Desmond Tutu *Guardian* 4 March 2013

[Trident missile factfile](#)

*BBC News* 23 September 2009

[1958 US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement](#)

*Wikipedia*

[The history of CND](#)

*Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament*

[Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#)

*History.com*

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## ORGANISATIONS

[Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament](#)

[UNODA](#)



## IN THE NEWS

[Labour 'has no policy to renew Trident', says senior aide](#)

*Guardian* 20 January 2016

[Nicola Sturgeon promises alternative jobs for nuclear workers](#)

*Scotsman* 18 January 2016

[Corbyn: UK could keep Trident submarines but without warheads](#)

*BBC News* 17 January 2016

[SNP hit out at Government over cost of 'immoral and obscene' Trident replacement](#)

*Daily Mail* 3 January 2016

[Renewing Trident debate splits vote at Stormont](#)

*Belfast Gazette* 24 November 2015

[Trident renewal costs rise by £6bn, defence review reveals](#)

*Guardian* 23 November 2015

[Cost of renewing Trident has doubled to £167billion says Tory MP who calls for it to be ditched](#)

*Daily Mirror* 26 October 2015

[David Cameron says that he would use nuclear weapons](#)

*Independent* 4 October 2015

[Jeremy Corbyn row after 'I'd not fire nuclear weapons' comment](#)

*BBC News* 30 September 2015

[Keeping Trident nuclear weapons 'in UK's national interest'](#)

*BBC News* 1 July 2014

[Trident nuclear deterrent 'completely useless' say retired military officers](#)

*Telegraph* 16 January 2009

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## AUDIO/VISUAL

[How powerful are modern nuclear weapons?](#)

*Test Tube News* 22 November 2015

[Iran and nuclear weapons](#)

Moral Maze *BBC Radio 4* 10 March 2012



## ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



### FOR STUDENTS

#### READ EVERYTHING .....

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

#### STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

#### BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

#### DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

#### DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

### FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, [www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.

**“WORLD REQUIRES  
THE CAPACITY  
TO MARSHALL  
CHALLENGING IDEAS  
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH  
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**

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