Despite some opposition within the ruling Labour Party, British lawmakers recently approved a plan to start designing a new class of nuclear-armed submarines. The vote puts the country on course toward retaining nuclear weapons until around midcentury, although top officials say that could still change.

Last December, Prime Minister Tony Blair’s government proposed building successors to the four current submarines composing the United Kingdom’s entire nuclear delivery force. (See ACT, January/February 2007.) The first two boats of the existing Vanguard-class fleet are expected to be retired by 2024, and the government contends the inaugural replacement vessel must be operational by then to maintain the current posture of always having one submarine on patrol. Estimating that it will take 17 years to get the first new submarine from the drawing board to the sea, Blair called on legislators to support the project this year. The House of Commons complied March 14, voting 409-161 to start the proposed submarine design phase. Immediately before, lawmakers defeated 413-167 an initiative to postpone the vote.

Opponents offered a variety of reasons for why a decision was unnecessary this year. Some lawmakers said that the Vanguard-class submarines might be modified to last longer than presumed, while some argued that the new class of boats should take no longer to develop than the 14 years required for the Vanguard fleet. Other lawmakers said it was premature to consent to such a consequential and long-term endeavor at such an early stage.

Blair and his backers, however, argued that the claim that development of the Vanguard fleet took only 14 years neglected to take into account all the work needed to complete the system. They also said that lawmakers should welcome the opportunity to give their input sooner rather than later and warned that if delays mounted, British industry might not be staffed and positioned properly to carry out the project.

Blair assured the House of Commons March 14 that this would not be the final opportunity for lawmakers to have a say on the program. “This parliament cannot bind the decisions of a future parliament, and it is always open to us to come back and look at these issues,” the prime minister stated. He implied one chance would be between 2012 and 2014 when the main contracts for design and construction are supposed to be awarded.

Approximately one-quarter of the 352 members of the Labour Party, which campaigned for unilateral British nuclear disarmament during much of the 1980s, were on the losing side of the two votes. Their defection was offset by strong support for the proposal from the main opposition party, the Conservatives.

The final measure included a commitment to pursue additional steps toward nuclear disarmament in compliance with the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Countries without nuclear weapons pledged to forswear them through that 1968 accord, while nuclear-armed states, including the United Kingdom, promised to eventually eliminate their atomic arsenals.

Whether London would break its NPT obligation by building new submarines was a key issue pitting
Labour Party members against each other. Indeed, four members of the government resigned their positions in protest over Blair's proposal. One of them, Nigel Griffiths, who was deputy leader of the House of Commons, argued March 14 that “we must lead the world in campaigning for the eradication of the nuclear threat and we must lead by example.”

Other Labour members echoed Griffiths during the nearly six-hour debate that preceded the two votes. They warned that developing another generation of nuclear-armed submarines would undermine the NPT by signaling that nuclear weapons were vital for preserving a country's security. One Labour member, Jeremy Corbyn, questioned whether adding “vastly enhanced” submarines would be “contrary to the whole spirit of the treaty and likely to encourage proliferation rather than reduce it.”

Blair, other Labour officials, and Conservative speakers asserted the United Kingdom was and would remain in compliance with the NPT, citing past and proposed nuclear reductions. Although developing new submarines is the core of the prime minister's plan, it also calls for shrinking the country's operational nuclear forces by 20 percent, to fewer than 160 warheads. London’s secret stock of reserve warheads is supposed to undergo an equivalent cut.

Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett blasted as “complete and utter rubbish” the notion that constructing new submarines would provoke the spread of nuclear weapons. She further dismissed the possibility of other countries following the United Kingdom’s lead even if it abolished nuclear weapons, saying, “[W]e have been disarming over the course of the past 10 years, with singularly little response.” Since the Cold War's end, the United Kingdom is the sole recognized nuclear-weapon state that has trimmed its nuclear capability to a single type of delivery option and claims to have reduced its nuclear explosive power by about 75 percent.

Submarine proponents repeatedly pointed to other countries' possession of nuclear arms and the suspected pursuit of such arms by other states. The prime minister and his supporters also contended the new submarines would be insurance against the uncertainty of the future, particularly the risk that “rogue” states or terrorists might acquire and use or threaten to use nuclear weapons.

Opponents responded that terrorists would not be deterred regardless of what armaments the United Kingdom brandished and that such a threat was less likely than other dangers, such as global climate change, requiring attention and money. Michael Ancram, a rare Conservative critic, asserted the submarine acquisition costs constituted “a pretty hefty premium against a pretty unlikely threat.”

The government projects that it might cost up to $39 billion to procure four new submarines and nearly $3 billion annually to operate them. Costs could be reduced if London builds only three new submarines, an option Blair has floated.

Skeptics say spending will be higher than estimated because arms programs are prone to exceeding budgets. They point to the United Kingdom’s ongoing and roughly $2 billion over budget Astute-class conventional attack submarine program as the latest example.

A majority of Labour members backed Blair despite, or perhaps because of, their party's past abolition advocacy. Some members appear to attribute, at least partially, the party's poor electoral results during the 1980s to that policy. Explaining his support for Blair's proposal, Labour member Gerald Kaufman stated, “It is one thing to revisit the scene of the crime; it is quite another to revisit the scene of the suicide.”

Still, Beckett said, “today's decision does not mean that we are committing ourselves irreversibly to maintaining a nuclear deterrent for the next 50 years.” She noted lawmakers will have chances in the coming years to affect the United Kingdom's nuclear status by deciding on replacing or renewing British nuclear warheads as well as the U.S.-made and -leased Trident D5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles that carry the warheads.

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