By Louise Edge, Nuclear Disarmament Campaigner, Greenpeace UK.

In the aftermath of the Conservative party conference, it's clear that in the run up to the UK General Election they plan to put the issue of spending cuts high on their agenda. But post-conference will the Conservatives have the courage and vision to open up a debate about cutting back on Trident?

It's now clear that the scale of the UK's debt crisis is likely to lead to cuts across all government departments. The MoD faces particular challenges. Heavy demands on existing forces, a long list of major defence projects in the pipeline, and a reported £35 billion pound black hole in the defence procurement budget mean that they are already dangerously overstretched, even before any budget cuts are made.

Inevitably these major projects are starting to be scrutinised, and even the political sacred cow that is Trident is now being questioned. How relevant are nuclear weapons to the threats we face or are likely to face in the future? What other threats are emerging? How does retaining Trident impact of global non proliferation initiatives? And if we do keep Trident, what will we have to sacrifice? These are just a few of the issues being discussed.

A recent Greenpeace report In the Firing Line added to this debate by detailing how Trident replacement is likely to cost the UK almost £100bn over its lifetime, when factors like new missiles, additional investment at AWE Aldermaston and uncertainties about government building estimates are taken into account.

A previous blog for this site reported on Minister for the Armed Forces Bill Rammell dismissing Greenpeace's costings at the Labour Party Conference (All at C at Brighton, 29 September 2009). However, his government's own figures show that when Trident's operating costs (of 5-6% of the defence budget per annum) are taken into account, Trident will cost some £81bn over its lifetime, and absorb 8-9% of the yearly defence budget up to 2027. Our estimate of other associated costs, using government figures, brings the lifetime costs of Trident replacement up to £97bn, far in excess of the £15-20bn procurement costs the government prefers to use.

These bald figures are giving many in the military pause for thought. Trident has already been publicly questioned by a range of defence experts, and when then Chief of Staff General Sir Richard Dannatt said recently that in his view 'much of our planned investment in defence is at the very least of questionable relevance to the challenges we face now and in the future', it's difficult to imagine that he wasn't referring to Trident.

However, decisions on Trident should clearly not be made purely on the basis of cost. The issue should be debated and decisions made on the basis of what actions will help make our world

more secure.

Central to this debate must be the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the question of what exactly the NPT actually commits the UK, along with other nuclear weapons states, to do under international law.

In 2007 eminent international lawyer Philippe Sands QC produced advice on exactly this issue (http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/MultimediaFiles/Live/FullReport/8072.pdf). His conclusions were that:

• Renewal, replacement or upgrading of Trident is likely to breach Article VI of the NPT.

• Attempts to justify Trident upgrade or replacement as an insurance against unascertainable future threats is incompatible with Article VI of the NPT.

Article VI of the treaty is central to what Gordon Brown recently described as the 'grand bargain' at the heart of the NPT. It obliges signatories to 'pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control'. Put at its simplest, when they signed the NPT nuclear weapons states committed to reduce and eventually eliminate their arsenals, and in return non-nuclear weapons states committed not to build nuclear weapons themselves.

The treaty has of course not been perfect. India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel have all developed nuclear weapons, while currently there is an international focus on Iran and trying to ensure that it does not build the capability to develop them. However it is worth remembering that if it falls then no internationally agreed instrument to control nuclear weapons remains.

Another key factor when considering Trident replacement is the growing chorus of respected individuals and groups calling for radical steps towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

These include the Global Zero initiative involving former heads of state from around the world, former foreign and defence ministers and top military commanders, and a parallel initiative by four influential American statesmen (Henry Kissinger, William Perry, George Schultz and Sam Nunn).

Their work has already led Barack Obama to publicly back the vision of zero nuclear weapons in April this year and helped bring about new US-Russian negotiations to cut nuclear stockpiles further. Their energy has also clearly been behind the recently agreed UN Security Council resolution on nuclear weapons.

And here lies the most forceful argument for reviewing the decision to replace Trident. We have arguably the most exciting opportunity since the end of the Cold War to move towards a world free of nuclear weapons. It will not happen overnight, and it will involve much time, energy and patience. But there is a palpable sense that the tide is turning and significant advances are possible.

Rather than planning to replace Trident and tying the UK into nuclear weapons for the next 40 years the UK government should be asking what measures the country could take, both symbolically and tactically, to support this growing international consensus and the NPT review process.

The emerging diplomatic initiative led by Obama will take us beyond US-Russian talks through to the wider NPT Review Conference next May, when a reconsideration of global nuclear stances is possible. The next UK government should take this opportunity to put Trident on the table in genuine multilateral disarmament talks, as required by the NPT. Taking a decision to renew Trident now on a business-as-usual basis merely reveals a lack of strategic vision and diplomatic short-sightedness that will inhibit multilateral progress.

The response of UK political parties has so far been timid. Cross-party agreement seems to be gradually emerging that Trident replacement should not be 'like for like'. Gordon Brown recently flagged proposals to shift towards three rather than four submarines, a proposal seemingly backed by the Conservatives.

The Liberal Democrats have also rejected 'like for like' replacement and indicated that they would go further than cutting one submarine, though the detail of their proposals won't emerge until Menzies Campbell completes his current review.

But looking at Philippe Sands' analysis it seems clear that cutting one submarine will make no difference to the UK's nuclear posture (if you accept the argument that new technology will mean submarines spend less time in refits, so continuous at sea deterrence can be maintained with three rather than four submarines)

Within the context of a decision to invest in a new generation of nuclear submarines which can operate up to 2058, replacement with three rather than four submarines will clearly not be seen as a significant disarmament measure by the non-nuclear weapons states, who have up until now honoured their end of the 'grand bargain'.

More substantial moves are required, ones that make it clear that the UK is committed to the vision of zero nuclear weapons, and ones that other countries can be encouraged to follow.

A recent paper by Bradford University Professor Nick Ritchie (http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bdrc/nuclear/trident/briefing5.html) outlines a series of alternative options that government could pursue aside from scrapping the system. The least ambitious option involves reducing not just submarines, but also missile and warhead numbers. The most ambitious involves switching to a low alert status without constant deterrent patrols but retaining the ability to reconfigure warheads and missiles.

These would be significant steps but also essentially cautious ones that would allow for a shift in posture if the external world changes and new threats emerge. Essentially they would be an insurance policy while we travel down the path to zero, giving time for new technologies for verification of disarmament to be refined and international agreements to be struck on issues like controlling fissile materials.

The steps are reminiscent of those advocated by another unlikely disarmament advocate - ex head of the CIA Admiral Stansfield Turner who was involved in negotiation of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) Treaties. In the late nineties he came to the UK to detail to MPs his concept of 'strategic escrow' as a means globally of de-alerting and then reducing nuclear stockpiles, gradually, to zero. (http://www.cdi.org/adm/1206/Turner.html)

It's high time to re-examine these and other ideas and engage in practical multilateral discussions about how to resolve the challenges that need to be overcome.

Meanwhile Greenpeace is calling on the political parties to agree to suspend any further expenditure on Trident replacement, and include the question of the future of Trident in a full strategic defence and foreign policy review after the next election. The supporters of Trident replacement would be given ample opportunity to make their case, but it is very much a case that needs to be made.