

BRIEF

BRITISH NUCLEAR POLICY

| PETER WATKINS |

Nuclear deterrence has been a major pillar of British defence policy since the mid-1950s. The United Kingdom maintains a minimum, credible, independent strategic nuclear deterrent force, assigned to the defence of NATO. Its purpose is purely defensive: to deter the most extreme threats to the security of the UK and to that of her NATO allies. The UK is currently renewing its nuclear deterrent as the existing capability is aging – but continues to seek opportunities for multilateral nuclear disarmament as the strategic circumstances allow.

The UK has possessed an operational independent nuclear capability since 1955. It was initially provided by long-range bomber aircraft – the so-called “V-bombers” – operated by the Royal Air Force. Since 1969, it has been provided primarily by nuclear-powered submarines, fitted with Polaris and then Trident ballistic missiles, operated by the Royal Navy. The decision to develop an independent nuclear capability was taken in 1947 after the United States Congress prohibited nuclear cooperation with other countries including the UK: the then Labour government believed that the UK needed a nuclear capability for a number of reasons – including international status, ability to influence the US, and as a hedge against other states, such as the Soviet Union, developing nuclear weapons – and resolved to develop one independently.¹ Nuclear cooperation with the US resumed in 1958. With growing concern about the effectiveness of an airborne deterrent, the UK decided in 1962 to switch to a sea-based capability – using Polaris ballistic missiles purchased from the US. The four nuclear-powered submarines to carry the missiles, and the nuclear warheads for the missiles, were to be designed and built in the UK – and the entire system was operationally independent. In 1962

also, the UK agreed to assign its nuclear capability to the defence of NATO.

At various points over the past decades, there has been domestic political debate over the continuing need for – and scale of – a British independent nuclear deterrent. In 1964, the incoming Labour Government was initially in favour of the UK pooling its Polaris force with the US in an Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) and of reducing the number of ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) from four to three. In the

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1980s, the Labour party supported unilateral nuclear disarmament. But, for most of the period, there has been consensus between the two main national political parties on nuclear deterrence. In 1980, the then government (Conservative, but building on a process started by its Labour predecessor) decided to invest in a second generation of SSBNs – to be armed with US-manufactured Trident ballistic missiles. These Vanguard class boats entered service in the 1990s. In late 2006, the then government (Labour) decided to start the process to replace these boats with a further generation of SSBNs – also to be armed with Trident missiles. This decision was confirmed in Parliament in July 2016 by a large majority of the House of Commons. The new Dreadnought class boats will start to enter service in the 2030s, sustaining the UK’s nuclear deterrent until the 2060s.

In parallel, with the end of the Cold War, the UK decided in the 1990s not to replace its remaining tactical air-launched nuclear bombs and to withdraw these from service.

1. MAIN ELEMENTS

The UK's nuclear deterrence policy is restated from time-to-time in strategic policy documents – such as Strategic Defence & Security Reviews or their equivalent and in documents published on the occasion of major decisions to renew capabilities. There is also extensive guidance material on the Ministry of Defence (MOD) website.² The most recent formal full statement of nuclear deterrence policy is in the Integrated Review of Defence, Security, Development & Foreign Policy of March 2021.³ The Integrated Review Refresh of March 2023 does not alter the underlying policy but focuses on steps to sustain the UK's "nuclear enterprise," namely the industrial capabilities and associated skills.⁴ The following summary draws mainly on these documents – but the main elements of the UK's nuclear policy have changed little over decades.

Since the 1960s, the UK has seen its nuclear capability as part of a wider deterrence strategy which, in key ways, it pursues with and through NATO: the UK sees NATO as the cornerstone of its defence and NATO is a nuclear alliance. The Integrated Review Refresh stated: "The foundational component of an integrated approach to deterrence and defence remains a minimum, credible, independent UK nuclear deterrent, assigned to the defence of NATO."⁵ In this respect, the UK's emphasis differs from France's.

The purpose of UK nuclear deterrence is defensive: the aim is to ensure, through the maintenance of the minimum necessary amount of destructive power, that potential aggressors know that the cost of attacking the UK (and its allies) would outweigh any benefit they might hope to achieve. Within that, a particular aim is not to allow such aggressors to constrain the UK's decision-making in a crisis or to sponsor nuclear terrorism.

The UK's policy is to have a secure second-strike capability through Continuous At Sea Deterrence (CASD). To ensure that the UK's nuclear capability is not vulnerable to pre-emptive action, it maintains one SSBN on patrol at all times. This requires a fleet of four submarines – in effect, one on patrol, one preparing to go on patrol, one recovering from a patrol, and another in longer-term refit.

In terms of declaratory policy, the UK has repeatedly stated that it would consider employing its nuclear weapons "only in extreme circumstances of self-defence." It has also stated that it is deliberately ambiguous about when, how, and at what scale it would employ those weapons. Successive British governments have therefore not supported concepts such as "No First Use" or "Sole purpose" (namely the position that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons by an aggressor). British nuclear doctrine has long recognised, not least during the Cold War, that there could be scenarios in which an aggressor believed that his objectives could be achieved by massive conventional (or non-nuclear) attack. It would therefore risk undermining deterrence to confine the defensive use of nuclear weapons to nuclear scenarios.

The UK states that it remains committed to the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons and that it supports the full implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which entered force in 1970. It has, therefore, taken successive steps to reduce its nuclear inventory, including the withdrawal of its tactical air-launched weapons in the 1990s and the reduction in size of its nuclear warheads stockpile. In 2010, the then government announced an intention to reduce the UK's overall nuclear warhead ceiling from not more than 225 to not more than 180 by the mid-2020s. The Integrated Review of 2021 announced that the evolving strategic environment (including developing technological and doctrinal threats) made this no longer possible – and that the UK would move to an overall ceiling of no more than 260.⁶ This announcement caused considerable political controversy at the time and accusations that it contravened the UK's obligations under the NPT. However, even after this change, the UK will still have the smallest stockpile of the five official nuclear weapons states and the only one to have reduced to a single delivery system.

Finally, the UK states that it will not use, or threaten to use, its nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear state party to the NPT. This negative security assurance does not apply to any state in material breach of its obligations under the Treaty – and the UK reserves its right to review this assurance if the future threat of weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical and biological capabilities or emerging technologies with a comparable impact.

2. NATO AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

As previously noted, since 1962, the UK has assigned its nuclear capability to NATO – and confirmed in the Integrated Review that it “will continue to do so, safeguarding European and Euro-Atlantic security.”⁷ What this means in practice is that the UK’s nuclear force is included within the concepts of collective deterrence agreed by NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) and that it would be available for use under plans made by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) – unless the UK’s “supreme national interests” required otherwise. The UK Defence Minister updates the NPG regularly on the readiness of the UK nuclear force and on the status of the current renewal programme.

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Critics of the UK’s nuclear policy have maintained that it is the US’s vastly larger nuclear capability that makes the decisive contribution to NATO’s deterrence posture and that the UK’s nuclear force is marginal. Successive UK governments have rejected this. Their argument has been that an aggressor might doubt whether the US would decide to employ its nuclear weapons in defence of Europe – and that an independent capability under European control provides some insurance against such a misperception. This “second centre of decision-making” argument is recognised by NATO. The 2022 Strategic Concept says:

The independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance. These Allies’ separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries.⁸

Potential adversaries must also take into account the UK’s nuclear capabilities when facing UK conventional forces deployed as part of NATO’s forward deterrence and defence posture, not least the UK-led battlegroup in Estonia.

Since it has its own independent nuclear deterrent, the UK has not contributed aircraft to NATO’s nuclear sharing mission – indeed, it no longer operates any dual-capable aircraft. However, the UK is a strong supporter of the nuclear sharing mission and sustaining its operational effectiveness – UK conventional forces contribute to NATO’s routine nuclear exercises such as Steadfast Noon.⁹

The UK sees nuclear cooperation as a key part of its longstanding and deep defence partnership with the US. It does not see a contradiction between such cooperation and having an “independent” deterrent – the UK nuclear force is operationally independent and only the UK Prime Minister can authorise the use of the UK’s nuclear weapons, even as part of a wider NATO response. Nuclear cooperation with the US encompasses deterrence policy, a shared pool of Trident missiles, warhead safety, and other matters. It takes place mainly under the auspices of the 1958 Mutual Defense Treaty (which is due for renewal in 2024) and the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement.

Finally, the UK has a longstanding nuclear relationship with France. Its current form stems from the decision to create a Joint Nuclear Commission in late 1992 – a body which continues to meet regularly.¹⁰ A few years later, the UK and French governments stated in the Chequers Declaration on nuclear cooperation: “We do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either France or the United Kingdom could be threatened without the vital interests of the other being also threatened”¹¹ – a formula that has been repeated on many subsequent occasions. In one of the two Lancaster House Treaties of 2010, the UK and France agreed to cooperate, under the Teutates programme, on nuclear technologies and have established a joint research facility in France.¹² With few exceptions (notably the formal relationship of the two nuclear forces to NATO), British and French nuclear policy and doctrine have converged significantly over the years.

3. FUTURE BRITISH NUCLEAR CAPABILITY

As previously noted, the UK Government is committed to replacing the four existing

Vanguard class SSBNs with four new boats – the first of these, Dreadnought, is due to enter service in the early 2030s. The estimated cost of this programme is 31 billion UK pounds plus a contingency of 10 billion UK pounds. By March 2022, 12.45 billion UK pounds had been spent.¹³ The Integrated Review Refresh announced that an additional 3 billion UK pounds would be allocated to the wider “nuclear enterprise,” although this will benefit the UK’s nuclear powered attack submarines (SSNs) as well as the SSBNs.¹⁴

The programme is intended to sustain the UK’s minimum, credible, independent deterrent until the 2060s. The concept – four SSBNs armed with Trident ballistic missiles – was revalidated in the Trident Alternatives Review commissioned by the then government in 2013; this examined potential alternative ways to sustain the UK’s nuclear deterrent, concluding that “[n]one of these offers

the same degree of resilience.”¹⁵ However, the concept is based on an underpinning strategic analysis, now declassified, conducted for the then Prime Minister in 1978 which assessed that: “Over the next 30-40 years, our planning need not be geared to any nuclear threat beyond the Soviet Union.” Today, the Soviet Union has

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gone – but the UK and NATO face a weaker but more dangerous Russia as well as an increasingly powerful China, creating a potential “two peer” nuclear challenge.¹⁶ The UK Government has said for many years that it will keep its nuclear posture under constant review in the light of the international security environment – and the 2021 change to the warhead ceiling reflected that. But it needs to ask itself whether bigger changes will be needed for the future.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Peter Hennessy, “The importance of being nuclear” in *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (Penguin Books, 2010), 49-51.
- ² UK Ministry of Defence, “[Guidance The UK’s nuclear deterrent: what you need to know](#),” Defence Nuclear Organisation, last modified on 16 March 2023.
- ³ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: Cabinet Office, 16 March 2021), 76-78.
- ⁴ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world* (London: Cabinet Office, 13 March 2023), 33-34.
- ⁵ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 33, para 5.
- ⁶ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 76.
- ⁷ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 77.
- ⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept* (Brussels: NATO, 29 June 2022), 8.
- ⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, “[NATO’s annual nuclear exercise gets underway](#),” NATO, 7 November 2022.
- ¹⁰ Bruno Tertrais, *Entente Nucléaire: Options for UK-French Nuclear Cooperation*, Discussion Paper 3 of the BASIC Trident Commission (British American Security Information Council, June 2012), 10.
- ¹¹ *UK-French Joint Statement on Nuclear Co-operation*, 30 October 1995.
- ¹² HM Government, *Treaty between the UK and the French Republic relating to Joint Radiographic / Hydrodynamics Facilities* (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2 November 2010).
- ¹³ UK Ministry of Defence, *The United Kingdom’s Future Nuclear Deterrent: 2022 Update to Parliament* (London: Ministry of Defence, 8 March 2023), 2.
- ¹⁴ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 34, para 6.
- ¹⁵ HM Government, *Trident Alternatives Review* (London: Cabinet Office and National security and intelligence, 16 July 2013), 10, para 32.
- ¹⁶ This passage draws on: Wyn Bowen and Geoffrey Chapman, *The UK, Nuclear Deterrence and a Changing World* (London: Freeman Air & Space Institute King’s College London, December 2022), 11.

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