

BRIEF

BRITISH NUCLEAR POLICY

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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-1980s. 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.