

The Future for UK Defence, Diplomacy and Disarmament



50 proposals for a more peaceful world

NET Nuclear
Education Trust

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GLOSSARY

ABMT	Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty	NET	Nuclear Education Trust
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, United States of America Security Partnership	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
AI	Artificial intelligence	NNWS	Non-nuclear weapon state
AWE	Atomic Weapons Establishment	NPR	Nuclear posture review
AWS	Autonomous weapon system	NPS	Nuclear weapon possessor state
BMD	Ballistic missile defense	NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
BWC	Biological Weapons Convention	NSS	National security strategy
CFE	Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe	NWFW	Nuclear Weapons Free World
CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty	NWS	Nuclear weapon state
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention	OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
EU	European Union	RevCon	Review Conference
FCAS	Future Combat Air System	RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
FMCT	Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty	SNP	Scottish National Party
ICAN	International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons	SSN	Ship submersible nuclear
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty	SSBN	Ship submersible ballistic nuclear
IPA	Infrastructure and Projects Authority	START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
IR	Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy	TPNW	Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons
MOD	Ministry of Defence	UK	United Kingdom
NAO	National Audit Office	UN	United Nations
NAS	Nuclear armed state	USA	United States of America
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation	WMD	Weapons of mass destruction
		WW2	World War Two

Note on terminology

The ‘official’ nuclear weapon states (NWS) under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) are China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US. The NPT defines an NWS as one “which has manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device prior to 1 January 1967”.¹ Members of the NPT without nuclear weapons are known as non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS). The four nuclear-armed states (NAS) that are not members of the NPT are North Korea, India, Pakistan, and Israel. NWS and NAS collectively are referred to in this report as nuclear weapon possessor states (NPS).

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In addition, ten participants were interviewed and requested to remain anonymous.

The Nuclear Education Trust is grateful to everyone who took the time to participate in our survey.

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FOREWORD

The world in 2024 feels like an increasingly dangerous and anxious place in which to live. People are routinely faced with news of a planet experiencing a series of interlocking and formidable challenges, including increasing military conflict, climate change, resource depletion, hunger, poverty, and terrorism.

Climate change and nuclear war have been described as the ‘twin existential threats’ facing humanity. However, there is very little political and public debate about the latter—including the destructive capability of nuclear weapons, the consequences of their potential use, and their role in geopolitics.

The Nuclear Education Trust (NET) is an independent charity whose mission is to inform and educate decision-makers and opinion formers, as well as the general public and the media, on issues relating to nuclear weapons. NET believes that in the current political context its mission has never been more important or urgent.

Following Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has made nuclear warnings and threats, nuclear treaties have been repudiated, and each of the five nuclear weapons states (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA) is modernising their nuclear arsenals. The Doomsday Clock is now at its closest point to midnight for 50 years.

It is clear that at some time—before it is too late—the world will need to get back on a path towards nuclear disarmament: less or no nuclear weapons. The problem is how? The question at the heart of NET’s survey of opinion formers is therefore: “What steps could and/or should the nuclear possessor states, and Britain in particular, now be taking?”

We are pleased that we had more than forty responses to our survey of opinion formers. These ranged from former UK Foreign and Defence Secretaries to think tank experts, from academics to representatives of all the political parties. As this report makes clear, there are a range of opinions on the important issues of defence, diplomacy, and disarmament.

The diversity of views should inform the body politic and also generate more discussion. Unfortunately, what little debate there is rarely happens in public. There is a culture in which defence is presented as a subject only for unanimity. If there is disagreement, discussion must take place behind closed doors and in hushed tones.

NET believes that in the current context more open public debate is required. It is not feasible to sit quietly and hope for the best—something must be done. Ten years ago NET published a report on the “UK’s National Defence Needs and its International Nuclear Disarmament Responsibilities”. In many ways this report—in more difficult times—is an update of that document, albeit in more challenging geopolitical circumstances.²

The aim is that this new report informs the current debate and encourages participation in it. It presents a range of potential next steps. Some are small and incremental, others innovative and transformative. We will all have views on which ones are better. But NET is certain that doing nothing is not an option. Please read on and please join the debate about how we move away from the threat of nuclear war.



Steve Barwick
Chair, Nuclear Education Trust

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

The Nuclear Education Trust (NET) is an independent charity whose mission is to inform and educate decision-makers and opinion formers, as well as the general public and the media, on issues relating to nuclear weapons. NET believes that in the current political context its mission has never been more important or urgent.

In recent years, nuclear arms control and disarmament treaties have been repudiated, and all five of the nuclear weapon states are modernising their nuclear arsenals. Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine raised the very real prospect of nuclear weapons being used for the first time since World War Two (WW2). Meanwhile, the Israel-Gaza conflict has the potential to engulf the Middle East in a regional war that could spread globally. The many other conflicts that are ongoing around the world receive relatively little news coverage by comparison.³

NET believes that there is far too little debate in the UK about issues of war and peace. In particular, the rising costs and risks of nuclear weapons need to be given far greater attention. The world is edging closer and closer to nuclear war, climate catastrophe, and self-destruction.

Purpose and methodology

Given current global instability, this report focuses on how the UK can best harness its defence and foreign policy to reduce international tensions and help get the world back on a path to nuclear disarmament. NET believes that discussion regarding the UK's international policy must be opened up to include a much wider range of voices, based on the principles of democracy, transparency, and accountability.

To encourage debate, NET has, over the last nine months, conducted a high-level survey of the opinions of UK parliamentarians, think tank experts, academics, and representatives of civil society organisations, on some of the most profound—and

difficult—questions facing decision-makers today. The questions they answered tested six key propositions that the UK Government included in their Integrated Review Refresh, launched in 2023.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report presents a range of opinions, ideas, and arguments on UK defence, diplomacy, and disarmament. Respondents' views inform the fifty recommendations in the main report, with eighteen illustrative recommendations included in this Executive Summary. These recommendations reflect the breadth of ideas for a more peaceful world that emerged from the responses to the survey. Some recommendations are more incremental, others more innovative, and a number potentially transformative for the UK's international policy.

Key findings Chapters 1-6

Chapter One: GLOBAL SECURITY TRENDS

Respondents broadly agreed that whilst the “transnational challenges” specified in the Integrated Review Refresh (IR2023) are quite vague, it is correct to say that we are living in an unstable era that is likely to get more volatile as the world experiences shifts in the prevailing balance of power. China’s rise was seen by some as posing a challenge to the US’s position as global hegemon and may result in growing competition between the nuclear weapon states.

“...I believe worsening transnational challenges is going to be the main trend and I am glad that UK national security is now seen by the government as global and not exclusively European.”

Lord David Owen (Independent Social Democrat; former Foreign Secretary)

Moreover, as long as Russia’s war against Ukraine continues, with no diplomatic resolution in sight, the fear of nuclear weapons use by Russia will remain and the likelihood of a new Cold War will grow. For many, the potential for progress on arms control and disarmament is thus low, particularly given the distrust between the US and Russia. Several people argued that the current level of tension between the major powers risks miscalculation that could lead to an escalation, including up to the use of nuclear weapons.

“We live, in general, in an extremely unhealthy political environment and nowhere is this more so than on security matters...I don’t trust the institutions and the culture that’s responsible for these documents...the political circumstances and the history of British thinking on what’s now called security or defence is conditioned by tectonic historical forces—people’s capacity for self-delusion is enormous...UK national security is a euphemism, it’s about the assertion of a certain identity in the world.”

Prof Andy Stirling (University of Sussex, Science Policy Research Unit)

Although there was a good deal of agreement among the respondents regarding the IR2023’s diagnosis, there were different views concerning what should be done about the world’s problems, and what role the UK should play. For example, those with more ‘mainstream’ views emphasised military solutions that correspond with US priorities, as outlined in Washington’s national security strategy. Those with more ‘critical’ viewpoints tended to be much more sceptical about the benefits of the UK using its armed forces in overseas operations. Notably, the UK’s military reach is generally seen by the respondents to this survey as having clear limits, despite the powerful capabilities the UK retains.

Recommendations

Future UK international policy reviews should:

- Give far more weight to the impacts of the climate crisis, including how developments in this area will have complex interactions with other areas of human and national security.

Incremental

- Be more democratic, transparent, and accountable by opening up future reviews to enable greater consultation and input from the public, civil society groups, and academics.

Innovative

- Support the creation of a truly multipolar world order based on international law, human security, a strengthened United Nations and the principles of inclusion, social justice, and democracy.

Transformative

Chapter Two: MANAGING THE UK'S MAJOR POWER RELATIONS

There was general agreement amongst respondents concerning the ambition expressed in IR2023 that the UK should seek to improve relations with Russia and China when the time is right. The main divergence of views concerned the extent to which Whitehall should take into account Moscow and Beijing's core security interests when shaping its future relations with them. However, in terms of what sort of relationship the UK should have with China and Russia, there was broad agreement amongst respondents that these two states must be dealt with separately, based on their respective actions, with UK policy calibrated accordingly in response.

“...dialogue requires willing partners, able and motivated to speak frankly and to honour the commitments they give. In that dialogue the UK needs to recognise its own capacity for deceit and reneging on its word (consider the Johnson Government's willingness to break the terms of the treaty it signed with the EU), which might enable it better to approach such things with other governments. It is hard to see any Russian dialogue bearing fruit under the Putin regime, however.”

Lord James Arbutnot (Conservative Party, former Chair of the Defence Select Committee)

For several respondents, Russia is primarily to blame for the decline of the arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament regime. For these respondents Russia is no longer a reliable or trustworthy partner for the West, and there is no chance of a better relationship with the Kremlin as long as Putin is in charge. However as one contributor opined, rather than waiting years for a resolution on the battlefield in Ukraine, diplomatic efforts focused on a new peace conference for Europe should be prioritised.

“Regarding UK relations with China and Russia, the decades since 1990 have been a mishmash of tub-thumping aggression and venal pandering enabling Russian oligarchs and Chinese proxies for the PRC establishment to buy up

real estate (land, expensive houses, blocks of flats and offices) and controlling stakes in major industries etc. Either approach is counterproductive. Veering between both is even worse, making British people more insecure, haemorrhaging international respect, and playing into the strategic interests of Putin and Xi.”

Dr Rebecca Johnson (Acronym Institute, Director)

Beijing was generally seen by those we interviewed as more responsible, so that a pragmatic relationship is achievable for the UK, balancing commercial interests and human rights concerns, for example. Some saw this approach as being important to prevent China and Russia from joining forces against the West. For those with knowledge of intergovernmental fora, the P5 process was cited as a key venue for nuclear possessors to discuss nuclear risk reduction. In addition, short term-measures of importance to stabilise great power relations (raised by a few respondents) include improving crisis diplomacy and conflict prevention mechanisms.

Recommendations

To bolster strategic stability the UK should:

- Invest more resources in its diplomatic capabilities, including conflict prevention and resolution; ensure there are regular P5 meetings to discuss nuclear risk reduction measures.

Incremental

- Provide clarity and transparency on its nuclear use doctrine, explaining its 'red-lines' and the logic behind its deterrence policy at each level of escalation, including up to the threat or use of nuclear weapons.

Innovative

- Convene European states to explore options for a regional security system that is compatible with a European Nuclear Weapons/Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone.

Transformative

Chapter Three: THE NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT REGIME

Defenders of government policy argued that the UK has done all it could to maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent and is acting as transparently as possible given international uncertainty and tension. Some of those with similar views argued that the UK has limited reach on the international stage and is responding to the actions of other major powers—such as Russia—whose behaviour undermines international order and prevents cooperation. Ambitious initiatives such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) were thus seen by these respondents as politically infeasible or even counter-productive, so the focus should be on preserving existing institutions and agreements.

“...what multi-domain arms control looks like isn't clear, especially when it involves actors not really interested in arms control for the time being. The challenge is tough: more actors and more capabilities than in the past.”

Prof Andrew Futter (University of Leicester, International Politics)

However, for the many respondents who disagreed with the IR2023's position on the broad subject of arms control and disarmament, the UK was, to quote one interviewee, “misguided and insincere”. A common point made was that the UK's rhetoric was not matching its actions and that the UK preferred to point fingers at other states rather than critically assess its track record in this area.

“The UK Government has, since 2010 reaffirmed its commitment to the NPT without actually putting any effort or high-level leadership into making sure that the Review Conferences achieve material positive outcomes. The UK Government dismissed the UN TPNW Treaty and would not engage with it quoting the NPT as the only worthwhile game in town.”

Baroness Susan Miller (Liberal Democrats; Co-President, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament)

Both mainstream and critical voices were in agreement that existing regimes concerning nuclear arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament are under significant pressure. As referred to above, many see the NPT in a worse state than a decade ago. Others lamented that over recent decades, numerous thoughtful disarmament proposals have been made by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and experts, but these have been ignored by the UK Government.

Recommendations

To reinvigorate international arms control and disarmament regimes, the UK should:

- When it is next chairing P5 meetings, ensure that crisis stability and the avoidance of arms races are prioritised.

Incremental

- Build on the United Nations Secretary General's 2023 Agenda for Peace and the 2023 Artificial Intelligence summit held in London, by convening states to discuss the regulation of emerging technology, including a legal instrument to ensure meaningful human control over weapons systems when using force.

Innovative

- Commence a diplomatic push for all nuclear weapons states to commit to a No First Use nuclear weapons policy. Engage purposefully with the TPNW, for example, by participating in meetings as an observer state, and/or by contributing research and resources to support its goals.

Transformative

Chapter Four: THE UK'S GLOBAL ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Several respondents, both those from more mainstream and more critical positions, questioned the UK's ability, as a medium-sized power facing economic difficulties at home, to shape the international environment. It was commonly felt that the UK's ambitions and purported reach did not match its capabilities. One view was that the UK should focus on the Euro-Atlantic region, rather than try to project power into Asia. A number of respondents were sceptical about the need for, and merits of, the AUKUS deal. There is thus a case for the next UK Government reviewing AUKUS, and considering all options, including withdrawal.

“Working closely with allies is vital for UK security. AUKUS is useful mainly as a means of containing procurement costs for the UK. But, like other big collaborative programmes, it also has risks.”

Prof Malcolm Chalmers (RUSI, Deputy Director General)

Another respondent pointed out that the UK now has limited leverage in terms of influencing China and Russia on nuclear arms control and disarmament. Others questioned the extent to which the UK has any significant influence over US policy. A key issue here will be who is in the White House after the US Presidential election in November 2024, and how the UK responds.

“Much of the world colonised by the UK is damaged and reparations are required – countries were stripped of their wealth and now disrespected. Treating people and countries with respect is right...We should admit that the UK has no real leverage with the USA – (there is) no such thing as the special relationship. However, we should still push them to be a responsible global player.”

Baroness Natalie Bennett (Green Party, former Leader)

A number of voices emphasised that, rather than seeking to “shape” the international system through military tools, the UK could prioritise cooperative

diplomatic actions to improve global justice and human security. Ideas raised by respondents include: increasing the aid budget; closing tax havens; providing financial support to the states affected by climate crises; reflecting on, and making reparations for, the UK's colonial past; establishing a more cautious and critical relationship with countries with poor human rights records (such as Israel and Saudi Arabia); and promoting a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone.

Recommendations

To contribute to global peace and justice the UK should:

- Recommit to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and mobilise resources to improve its performance against SDG targets. Commit to a timetable to get spending on the international aid budget back to 0.7% of GNI and ensure this is primarily spent in poor and developing countries.

Incremental

- Prepare plans for how it can diverge from Washington on international policy, especially if a future US President pursues a more aggressive and unilateralist approach.

Innovative

- Take diplomatic and economic action against states involved in human rights abuses, war crimes and other illegal activity, including sanctions and the suspension of trade deals. The UK should apply consistent standards across its international relationships, based on protecting human rights and observing international law.

Transformative

Chapter Five: UK NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY

In defence of the decision to increase the cap on the UK's total number of nuclear warheads, mainstream respondents highlighted the need to respond to a febrile security environment. In addition, it was argued, the increase was not significant and much less than quantitative nuclear expansion by other NWS, particularly China. Defenders of UK policy also argued that the UK was more transparent than other nuclear possessors and that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was bolstered by the UK's recent nuclear decisions.

“My understanding is that enhanced Russian missile defence of Moscow has led UK officials to calculate that a larger number of at-sea UK nuclear warheads is a necessary pre-condition to the UK's nuclear deterrent being viewed as credible.”

Peter Jenkins CMG (British Pugwash, Chair; former UK Ambassador to the IAEA)

However, several voices from across the political spectrum lamented the UK's decision to increase the nuclear warhead stockpile cap, seeing it as part of an aggressive posture towards Moscow, and potentially Beijing, with no military logic. Experienced and knowledgeable respondents felt in the dark as to why this decision had been taken. Some argued that it may be a response to improved missile defences around Moscow, increases to Beijing's nuclear warhead stockpile, or for domestic political reasons—but this remains unclear.⁴ Some argued the move was detrimental not just to the UK's reputation and previous track record in this area—in addition to nonproliferation norms—but British democracy more generally. Yet the official line is that further explanation of this decision will not be forthcoming.

“Regarding the UK's nuclear warhead numbers, I don't know the reason for lifting the cap. I have asked former senior civil servants about this, but I am still not clear on the rationale or the operational military reason. I think the UK's adversaries will choose to regard this move

as escalatory. The UK is, however, not acting in a vacuum. We have seen increases in other states' nuclear weapons stockpiles in recent years, including China and Russia. Trident is so destructive that 180 warheads would wreak incredible devastation. Pointing to the Moscow Criterion, and Russia's improved ballistic missile defences, isn't satisfying as an explanation for raising the cap.”

Richard Foord MP (Liberal Democrats, Defence Spokesperson)

Critics of UK nuclear possession also highlighted the opportunity costs of modernising Trident nuclear weapons, especially given the ongoing impacts of austerity and the Covid-19 pandemic. Other respondents highlighted the potential for nuclear deterrence to fail. Such comments are a reminder that the stability, effectiveness and value of deterrence, and the postures of nuclear possessors, are under particular scrutiny following Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Recommendations

To progressively reform UK nuclear weapons policy:

- UK political parties should hold inquiries into the rising costs and risks involving the UK's nuclear weapons programme. Regular parliamentary time for debates on and oversight of the UK's defence nuclear enterprise, military spending and overseas military deployments should be established, focused on providing meaningful scrutiny.

Incremental

- The UK should give credible negative security assurances to NNWS, meaning that the UK will not threaten to use, or use, nuclear weapons against them.

Innovative

- The UK should reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in its security policy, including by moving to a No First Use posture, ending continuous at-sea deterrence, and reducing nuclear warhead numbers.

Transformative

Chapter Six: UK DEFENCE AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS SPENDING

Views on the question of how much the UK should spend on its armed forces generally corresponded to respondents' perspectives on what the UK's role in the world should be. For example, for those who would prefer the UK to maintain its traditional posture of global engagement and power projection, military spending should be maintained or increased. For these respondents, an enlarged Russian threat justifies the UK's increased focus on nuclear deterrence and maintaining an up-to-date and credible nuclear force. Meanwhile, those who favour the UK moving to a more modest defence posture—focused on the Euro-Atlantic area and human security—generally prefer the UK to divert resources from military spending to civil goods and services, and increase spending on addressing the climate emergency.

“The UK should up its defence budget to 3% of GDP. We have hollowed out forces across the spectrum...Russia has been testing the UK's defences...The UK needs to be very careful with defence spending to minimise as much as possible project delays and cost overruns...AI and quantum can help out with design and delivery, and the management of budgets and timelines.”

Dr Kristan Stoddart (Swansea University, Associate Professor in Cyber Threats, Politics, Philosophy and International Relations)

Defenders of UK nuclear possession argued that to ensure the safety and surety of the Trident nuclear weapons system, increased investment was necessary. For example, two respondents emphasised the need to upgrade the UK's nuclear infrastructure which, they argued, had suffered from years of underfunding and poor decisions. In addition, some argued that military/nuclear spending can contribute to strategic stability by ensuring the UK's nuclear weapons system is secure and does not malfunction, and is thus compatible with arms control.

“The announced money is far below what is needed to shore up the UK's nuclear weapon upgrades. These upgrade projects are a clear breach of the spirit of the NPT and should never have been embarked upon; they will continue to swallow resources that would be better spent on public wellbeing at a far greater level than is being publicly admitted.”

David Cullen (personal capacity)

Two senior academics we spoke to advanced a more pessimistic view, arguing that because there is no prospect of progress on international arms control and disarmament negotiations in the near future, the UK's actions in this area are irrelevant. However, several other respondents highlighted how UK nuclear modernisation and rearmament undermines its NPT disarmament obligations, and proposed that the UK needs to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in its security policy. In addition, a number of respondents argued that the UK should join the TPNW and outline a timetable for eliminating its nuclear weapons.

Recommendations

To provide democratic oversight and control over defence spending, the UK should:

- Provide detailed explanations on the economic and industrial connections between the civil and defence nuclear enterprises so the public and parliamentarians can assess how resources are being allocated, and the merits of alternative energy and defence policy options.

Incremental

- Develop a new way of calculating what level of defence spending is appropriate to move beyond artificial and irrelevant GDP percentage targets.

Innovative

- Limit any new funding for nuclear weapons spending to keeping nuclear sites and equipment safe and secure (including on submarine decommissioning), pending reductions to the nuclear arsenal, and disarmament action.

Transformative

Conclusion

The UK today is, in many respects, a middle-ranking power. Yet, as outlined in IR2023, Whitehall retains pretensions to be a global player. Many respondents to our survey argued that to help prevent conflicts involving the major powers escalating up to nuclear war, and assist the world to step back from the precipice of climate catastrophe, the UK must instead act as a nation amongst nations, not beholden only to the US, but building wider partnerships—in Europe and beyond.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of the UK using diplomatic tools to help end conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, prioritise green investment over any expansion in military spending, be more proactive in meeting its nuclear disarmament obligations, and more supportive of new multilateral initiatives such as the nuclear ban treaty and a global No First Use agreement.

The problem is that successive UK governments have largely turned a deaf ear to calls from civil society for an international policy based on peace, disarmament, justice and human rights. Political leadership and a positive alternative vision are thus urgently required to produce both a coherent and progressive new international policy for the UK.

This should begin with much greater public and parliamentary scrutiny of the UK's nuclear weapons programme. As a depository state of the NPT, the

UK has an obligation to pursue and conclude, in good faith, negotiations toward nuclear disarmament, and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its security policy. Yet the story the UK has had to tell in recent years is one of nuclear modernisation and rearmament.

The next twelve months are set to be a momentous period. Developments with the Russia-Ukraine war and the Gaza-Israel conflict could significantly reshape global security. In terms of domestic politics, the UK General Election will likely take place in late 2024 as will the US Presidential Election. Discussion regarding the future of defence, diplomacy and disarmament across the globe will almost certainly intensify after these elections.

This report outlines a number of opportunities that exist to push the debate in the UK in a progressive direction. For those who agree that the urgent task is for the UK and the world to get back on a path towards nuclear disarmament, what is required now is courage, an understanding that progressive change is possible and that a darker, dystopian future is not inevitable.

INTRODUCTION

This report aims to inform the reader about contemporary debates concerning the UK's role in the world and empower people to participate in the democratic political process. This is done by providing insights into many of the main challenges facing the UK, and the factors that must be weighed when making judgments about key international policy questions.

Our starting point has been the UK Government's Integrated Review Refresh of 2023, which updated the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. To stimulate debate on the future of UK defence, diplomacy and disarmament, the Nuclear Education Trust (NET) has sought informed views on six key international policy issues that the Refresh document discusses. These issues include:

- i) What are the key global security trends of our time and how do they interact with the nuclear arms control and disarmament regime?
- ii) What sort of relationship should the UK have with China and Russia; how can the UK prevent, de-escalate and resolve conflict; and how can the UK contribute to nuclear risk reduction?
- iii) How can the UK help revitalise and rebuild the nuclear arms control and disarmament regime?
- iv) What are the UK's key international relationships and how do they relate to nuclear arms control and disarmament; what are the costs, risks and benefits of the AUKUS deal?
- v) Does the UK have a "minimum credible, independent nuclear deterrent", as the Integrated Review Refresh claims, and what are the alternatives to the current UK nuclear weapons policy?
- vi) Is the UK's defence and nuclear weapons budget justifiable and necessary; and is such spending compatible with progress on arms control and disarmament?

Our project aimed to delve deeper into these, and other related questions, to contribute to a pro-

gressive debate about what security means for Britain and the world in the 21st century. Our aim was to enrich public and parliamentary discussion and bring together the views of those who are concerned about these issues to generate next steps thinking. It was important to do this because, despite the existence of several valuable recent research and advocacy projects, there remains a lack of discussion in the UK concerning vital issues of national and human security.⁵ This report addresses this gap by collating a spectrum of informed and expert views on UK security. As a number of people we interviewed for this report noted, democracy, transparency and accountability are vital if decision-making in this area is to improve.

The rationale for the six questions we posed, the process by which the interviews were conducted, and who we interviewed, are covered in the Methodology section, which is included as an appendix to this report. The responses to each of the questions posed to interviewees are discussed in detail in Chapters 1-6 of the report. Respondents' answers allowed us to identify several areas for future progressive research and policy action by actors working inside and outside of government. We have therefore provided policy recommendations that we have termed 'incremental', 'innovative' or 'transformative' at the end of each chapter, which primarily draw on the answers we received from respondents.

For some recommendations, respondents' thoughts on, or solutions to, an issue or problem have been combined—or purposefully developed—to connect them with, or build on, existing policy initiatives or proposals. To better appreciate the responses and recommendations outlined in the six chapters it is necessary to provide some background and context on the key issues they cover, beginning with a discussion of what the Integrated Review is.

What is the Integrated Review and why does it matter?

In recent times, successive UK governments have largely preferred continuity to a reappraisal of es-

established approaches to international and security policy. The key official document in this regard is the government's defence review. Since the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review, British governments have published such reviews every five years, setting out how they plan to act on the global stage and the military capabilities and other defence and foreign policy tools required to realise their vision.⁶

For the last few reviews, the global situation has seemed less stable and promising than the one before. At the time of the 2015 UK defence review things were difficult enough.⁷ Ongoing tensions between the US and Russia, between Iran and Gulf Arab states, and Washington's 'pivot to Asia' had led the 2015 US National Military Strategy to conclude that "the probability of U.S. involvement in interstate war with a major power is assessed to be low but growing."⁸ In 2014, senior UK and US military, political and diplomatic figures warned that the risk of nuclear conflict was rising because of global tensions, as well as insecure nuclear arsenals and fissile materials.⁹ This warning was echoed in a 2019 report, entitled 'Rising nuclear risk', by the House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations.¹⁰ By 2024 the international security scene has deteriorated even further. It is clear that British decision-makers are faced with a highly complex and quickly evolving strategic environment requiring bold, innovative, and responsible leadership.

In 2021 the UK Government, then led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, produced its own defence review, which was reformulated as the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy.¹¹ This document laid out how the UK would engage with the many regional and global challenges it faces under the ambitious frame of 'Global Britain'. The Integrated Review is thus the foundational document for current official UK policy in these areas. However, the fast-moving nature of international affairs led to the new Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, publishing a 'Refresh' of the Integrated Review in 2023. This document would, in the Government's words "supplement and extend", rather than replace the Integrated Review.¹²

The Integrated Review Refresh (IR2023) was primarily justified as being necessary to respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and China's "more aggressive stance in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait". Although not a full defence review, IR2023 thus increased the UK's focus on the Indo-Pacific, presenting China's rise as an "epoch-defining challenge."¹³ A key subject for discussion involving the UK's 'Indo-Pacific tilt' was the AUKUS deal, which is a partnership between the UK, US and Australia. AUKUS involves the three nations cooperating closely on military capabilities, including submarine technology and other areas such as artificial intelligence and quantum technologies.¹⁴

Whilst there had been differences in emphasis between how London and Washington dealt with China, the Integrated Review and IR2023 largely brought UK international policy in line with the US. For example, the Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review announced an age of "great power competition" and the US Department of Defense's 2018 National Defence Strategy identified "long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia" as the "principal priorities for the Department." As a result, an "increased and sustained investment" in military programmes was deemed essential by the US if it were to be able to prevail in an all-out war with one or both of these nations.¹⁵ The UK followed suit, announcing a total increase to the defence budget of £11 billion over 2023 and 2028.¹⁶

The global security context

Climate change and nuclear war have been described as the 'twin existential threats' facing humanity.¹⁷ The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists describe how these two existential dangers "are compounded by a threat multiplier, cyber-enabled information warfare, that undercuts society's ability to respond."¹⁸ In 2023 the Bulletin's Science and Security Board moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock forward so that it now stands at 90 seconds to midnight "the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been."¹⁹

The threats of climate change and nuclear war overlap and are linked in several ways. For example, the depth and immediacy of the unfolding environmental crisis means that it is important to consider the impact it will have on nuclear weapons infrastructure and the strategic calculations of nuclear possessors.²⁰ In addition, most uses of nuclear warheads would likely have very severe or catastrophic long-term environmental consequences.²¹ As a result, authors such as Martin Rees and Toby Ord have asked whether human civilisation will survive the 21st century given both these and other threats, including those posed by engineered pandemics and artificial intelligence (AI).²²

Despite the opportunity costs and catastrophic risks involved, some of the nuclear weapon states (NWS) are optimising the effectiveness of their nuclear arsenals by producing ever more advanced, threatening and potentially usable weaponry.²³ Technological developments in conventional arms, such as precision-guided munitions, as well as other emerging cyber and AI capabilities, also pose dangers of military entanglement and unintended escalation involving China, Russia, the US and Washington's allies—which could potentially lead to nuclear war.²⁴

At the same time, complex nuclear modernisation efforts are increasingly costly and difficult for NWS—including the UK—requiring advanced industrial skills and significant resources, which may act as a brake on the speed with which these systems can be successfully deployed.²⁵ For a relatively small nation such as the UK, with limits to its economic, human, and technological resources, this poses a major challenge.²⁶ It also presents an opportunity for appropriate arms control and disarmament regimes to be agreed between the major powers. However, other trends may make such efforts more difficult. For example, a recent opinion poll by the British Social Attitudes Survey shows that an immediate effect of the Ukraine-Russia conflict appears to have been an increase in support for British nuclear possession amongst UK adults.²⁷

The Ukraine conflict thus continues to be a subject of deep concern as it enters its third year. Fears persist regarding the potential use of nuclear weap-

ons by Russia, and the widening of the conflict, with no end currently in sight, despite there still being options for a negotiated peace settlement, according to Professor Anatol Lieven.²⁸ A new Cold War involving Russia, China and the West looms on the horizon. Certain US military leaders briefed in 2022 and 2023 that China may soon invade Taiwan.²⁹ China's build-up of nuclear weapons and Russia's new nuclear capabilities may lead to a nuclear arms race if the US responds to this "two nuclear peer problem" by expanding its own nuclear arsenal.³⁰ It can seem that World War Three is around the corner—and may have already begun—as conflicts multiply, the major powers rearm, and regional alliances form.³¹

UK nuclear weapons modernisation

The United Kingdom is replacing all four parts of its nuclear weapons system: submarines, missiles, warheads, and associated infrastructure. It is a huge, national, multi-decade endeavour. The Nuclear Information Service has estimated the total cost of replacing the UK's nuclear weapon system between 2019 and 2070 to be at least £172bn.³² This figure includes: i) the cost of replacing the four main parts of the programme (submarine, missile, warhead, and associated infrastructure) ii) ongoing maintenance and in-service costs iii) some support costs e.g. from the Astute attack submarine programme.³³ However, opacity in government accounting on nuclear weapons spending, and future inflation, means that it is particularly difficult to identify the full costs of this programme and the extent to which those costs are accelerating.

The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review described building four new nuclear-armed submarines alone as "equivalent in scale to Crossrail or High Speed 2."³⁴ However, the UK Government's centre of expertise for major projects has, for several years, warned that the nuclear enterprise is facing serious difficulties.³⁵ Many projects within the UK's nuclear weapons programme have gone vastly over their original budgets.³⁶ New funding is being poured in to meet project cost increases.³⁷ The programme is also facing severe delays, raising questions about the UK's ability to produce this weapons system.³⁸

The UK's nuclear-armed submarine (SSBN) construction is underway but prone to problems.³⁹ Construction delays may disrupt the UK's ability to maintain a continuous at-sea deterrent in the 2030s if the required number of submarines is unavailable. This could happen if the new Dreadnought SSBNs are not ready for service, or if one or more of the ageing Vanguard SSBNs unexpectedly requires major repair.⁴⁰

It is also possible that over the next decade the following issues may combine to make Trident ineffective and vulnerable from both a political and military viewpoint:

- significant cost escalation for the next-generation SSBN programme,
- industrial troubles and technological developments (including in cyber, AI, and underwater warfare, potentially making SSBNs detectable),
- further problems with sea-launched missile testing,
- the impact of climate change on coastal nuclear infrastructure, and
- a vote for Scottish independence

As a result, alternative policy options—including disarmament—may become more inviting over time to a UK government.⁴¹

The prospects for nuclear arms control and disarmament

Looking at developments on nuclear weapons matters more widely, in recent years a number of key arms control agreements have been formally suspended, not complied with, or killed off. These include: New START, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABMT) and the Open Skies Treaty.⁴² Nuclear weapons modernisation, and increases to the size and diversity of nuclear arsenals by some nuclear weapon possessor states, mean that the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the

NPT are also now under mounting pressure.⁴³ The degradation of nuclear arms control and disarmament has seriously damaged strategic stability between the major powers, which is of vital importance to the security of the UK and the world.

The Integrated Review states that the UK remains “committed to the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons. We continue to work for the preservation and strengthening of effective arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation measures, taking into account the prevailing security environment.”⁴⁴ The UK and its partners in the P5 recently met several times to discuss nuclear risk reduction, and renounced the possibility of trying to fight and win a nuclear war.⁴⁵

In 2017, 122 states voted at the United Nations in support of the Treaty on the Prohibition on Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).⁴⁶ This treaty prohibits the development, testing, production, acquisition, possession, stockpiling, use, and any threat to use nuclear weapons. If the UK wanted to join the treaty, it would have to verifiably and irreversibly destroy its nuclear weapons programme first, or present a “legally binding, time-bound plan” for eliminating its nuclear weapons programme.⁴⁷ The UK has not yet signed or ratified the treaty.

The results of a British Pugwash survey of UK public opinion in 2023 show that there are notable differences between the British public's views and the policies of the UK Government concerning nuclear weapons. 40% support among UK adults for the UK retaining nuclear weapons sits alongside significant public support for policies that would control, limit, and even eliminate the UK's nuclear weapons—including amongst supporters of nuclear possession.⁴⁸ Moreover, the idea of the UK joining the TPNW, which entered into force in 2021, is supported by 59% of the British public, according to a 2021 Survation poll.⁴⁹ Polling commissioned by NET in 2022 found that around 7 in 10 (68%) of UK adults believe the use of nuclear weapons in any circumstances is unacceptable. In addition, 8 in 10 (79%) of UK adults would support all countries with nuclear weapons committing to a policy of never using nuclear weapons first in a conflict.⁵⁰

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter 1: Global Security Trends

1.1 Question One

IR2023 states that: “IR2021 identified four trends that would shape the international environment to 2030: shifts in the distribution of global power; inter-state, ‘systemic’ competition over the nature of the international order; rapid technological change; and worsening transnational challenges. Our assessment is that these remain the trends that will dominate the decade ahead, and to which the UK national security and international policy must respond.”⁵¹

Do you agree or disagree? Are there other global security trends the UK should consider? What impact will these trends have on nuclear arms control and disarmament efforts?

1.2 Interview quotes

i) Agree statements

“I agree with the assessment. My main addition would be to put more emphasis on uncertainty and volatility. UK policy needs to respond to both trends – chronic conditions – and events. And the latter could even fundamentally alter some of the trends. Also, the magnitude of the trends – how rapidly climate or AI threats deepen, how far US / China relations worsen – remains uncertain. Most of these trends make nuclear arms control and disarmament more difficult.”

Prof Malcolm Chalmers (RUSI, Deputy Director General)

“Of the four trends, I believe worsening transnational challenges is going to be the main trend and I am glad that UK national security is now seen by the government as global and not exclusively European. This is demonstrated by the ‘tilt’ to the Pacific which I think has two strengths, firstly it is there where the main challenges, after the Ukraine war, will occur. And, as importantly, the British decision is seen in Washington – and rightly so - as strengthening the capacity of any President - but particularly if we were

faced by Trump again - to maintain a strong commitment to NATO.”

Lord David Owen (Independent Social Democrat; former Foreign Secretary)

ii) Mixed statements

“Agree. But two of the main global security trends are the loss of biodiversity and climate change that will and are already having a major impact on the environment and leading to the possible collapse of life support systems. These trends will take and are already taking activists away from working on peace and disarmament issues as they move to what they see as the more immediate existential threat. Of course, as our natural world collapses more and more and the 1% cling on to their profits and power there will be more inter and intrastate conflicts some of which may well lead to nuclear threats.”

Anonymous

“I partly agree but not fully...But I am not convinced that an international order based on the UN Charter and international law is challenged by a diversity of politico/socio/economic models (best seen, realistically, as inevitable); it is only a US “rules-based order” – not the same as the UN order – that is threatened by systemic competition.”

Peter Jenkins CMG (British Pugwash, Chair; former UK Ambassador to the IAEA)

iii) Disagree statements

“Environmental threats, whilst implied, are missing. To not explicitly mention the climate and broader environmental threats, or state them as a topline security threat is, I think, almost science denial and narrowly militaristic in its thinking, leaving the UK dangerously unprepared. At least Boris Johnson talked about climate change and had a ten-point plan for a green industrial revolution, even though it was poorly conceived. Johnson understood climate change as a global threat, although he did not put sufficient resources into dealing with the problem.

The Sunak government have effectively said climate change is not that important. This changed with the IR23 paper. Climate change is now treated as less important by the UK despite warnings (e.g. in the World Economic Forum risk report), which categorises global risks. Six of the top ten risks identified in that report over the next ten years are environmental.”

Dr Stuart Parkinson (Scientists for Global Responsibility, Executive Director)

“Transnational challenges’ is a vague catch-all and misses three core challenges – accelerating climate breakdown, socioeconomic difference with consequent gross marginalisation, and persistence of a military culture that prioritises the use of force. Accelerating climate breakdown, on all current trends, will most likely be the dominant security challenge.”

Prof Paul Rogers (University of Bradford, Peace Studies and International Relations)

iv) Other global security trends the UK should consider

“There have been significant shifts in global power – and a severe lack of thinking about what a second Trump presidency might mean – probably the trend towards isolation of the USA will continue. That would change everything. I am worried that people are not thinking about this enough... There is a huge push to see the direction of global travel towards Cold War Mark 2 – but history does not repeat itself and history is made by people. A different future is possible based on genuine respect for all states including Indonesia and Brazil. A multi-polar world is what we should be looking towards.”

Baroness Natalie Bennett (Green Party, former Leader)

v) Implications for nuclear arms control and disarmament

“Addressing climate change, ecological decline, economic turbulence, pandemics, food supply problems and migration can only be done through building trust and confidence. This process will be greatly enhanced through a serious commitment to arms control and nuclear disarmament.”

Deolinda Eltringham (Green Party, Peace, Security and Defence policy working group member)

“Nuclear powers and nuclear threshold powers will draw the lesson from the Ukraine War that one should not give up one’s nuclear weapons / the nuclear option.”

Prof Beatrice Heuser (University of Glasgow, International Relations)

“All of these trends will make arms control and disarmament more challenging. They suggest more competitive and adversarial relations among major players, in which multilateral forums are (as in recent years) used as tools for the exercise of power politics, and rendered largely stagnant.”

Anonymous

1.3 Interview responses: discussion and context

Respondents broadly agreed that whilst the “transnational challenges” specified in the 2021 Integrated Review are quite vague, it is correct to say that we are living in an unstable era that is likely to get more volatile as the world experiences shifts in the prevailing balance of power. In particular, China’s rise is seen as posing a challenge to the US’s position as global hegemon and will result in growing competition between the nuclear possessors. Moreover, as long as Russia’s war against Ukraine continues, with no diplomatic resolution in sight, the possible use of nuclear weapons by Putin will remain and fears of a new Cold War will grow. For many, the potential for progress on arms control and disarmament is thus low, given the tension and distrust between the major powers.

Although there is a good deal of agreement among the respondents regarding the Integrated Review’s diagnosis, there are different views concerning what should be done about the world’s problems, and what role the UK should play. For example, more ‘mainstream’ views expressed in the survey responses emphasise military solutions that correspond with US priorities, as outlined in Washington’s national security strategy. Those with more

'critical' viewpoints tended to be much more sceptical about the benefits of the UK using its armed forces in overseas operations. Notably, the UK's military reach is generally seen by the respondents to this survey (and expert opinion more widely) as having clear limits, despite the powerful capabilities the UK retains, and the UK's willingness to use military force.⁵² In their view there should be greater recognition that the UK's ability to be a world player, that can respond to all the global security trends identified in the Integrated Review, is constrained.

A common argument from critical voices is that climate change is missing from the four trends outlined in the Integrated Review, or not given nearly enough weight considering the impacts that it will potentially have, including societal breakdown, stimulating migration, and causing conflict. Boosting societal resilience and greening the economy were thus emphasised as actions the UK should take in response to climate dangers. Moreover, nuclear weapons and deterrence, it was argued, have no relevance to managing the consequences of climate change. In addition, more critical voices argue that the UK will have to develop a new mindset and tools to properly respond to the era it is entering. In summary, these type of views advance the concept of human security, which prioritises global cooperation and environmental protection. In addition, the opportunity costs of militarism and arms races are highlighted. In terms of tackling climate change, some of those adhering to this view are more sceptical of the benefits of technology-based approaches (such as nuclear energy) than others, preferring the use of renewable energy resources.

In terms of the analytical methods used by the Integrated Review Refresh, a number of interviewees also highlighted how global security trends interact in unpredictable ways, likely resulting in negative impacts being exacerbated. For example, increasing migration caused by climate catastrophe can contribute to international tensions and the likelihood of conflict, as well as placing more stress on national economies if not handled well. For a hi-tech, industrial power such as the UK, which relies on energy imports, international instability may also have a greater negative effect on its energy security.⁵³ In addition, one anonymous respondent argued

that some of the trends identified in the Integrated Review Refresh are structural, whilst others are based on agency and states' choices (e.g. pursuing competition rather than cooperation), but that this was not clearly articulated in the document.

In terms of which other global security trends the UK should consider, several respondents mentioned the current conflict in the Middle East. Moreover, a few respondents argued that the UK should adopt a more critical approach to Israel. Baroness Miller stated that "The UK and its allies should, at the least, address the issue that Israel has undeclared nuclear weapons and has not signed the NPT. This should form part of the price for supporting Israel."

A more fundamental disagreement with the ideas advanced in the Integrated Review came from those respondents who have a more radical set of political views. These respondents argued that the underlying logic and 'elite framing' of the UK's security policy needs to be exposed. Such respondents said they view UK international policy in such a critical light because decision-makers are advancing elite interests whilst suppressing the needs and interests of the majority. For this group, the UK's recent international policies have had significant negative impacts on global security and need to be seen in relation to the UK's imperialist, militarist and neoliberal economic legacy.

Those holding more mainstream positions focused on the uncertainty prevalent on the international stage when proposing policy areas the UK should focus on. Common points made by respondents in this category included:

- emerging technology (such as cyber and artificial intelligence) requires attention from government and regulators;
- the UK remains a significant world player but its ability to influence international developments alone is limited;
- strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction should be priorities for the UK;

- for the foreseeable future Russia will be the state posing the primary threat to UK national security;
- the UK needs to help with the US's containment of China, hence the Asia-Pacific tilt is justified;
- the UK should boost NATO capabilities and partner with states to develop advanced military capabilities.

Several respondents also highlighted the need to consider the connection between domestic political and social developments and how these interact with international trends. Domestic political developments contributing to social unrest and turmoil that were mentioned included:

- rising inequality and marginalisation;
- the impact of growing migration;
- the spread of disinformation;
- the challenges posed by a second Trump Presidency in the US;
- the challenges that the election of extremist leaders and/or rising corporate power pose to democratic institutions and international cooperation.

One activist respondent concluded that UK civil society is increasingly strained by having to respond to these multiplying challenges.

In terms of nuclear arms control and disarmament, the picture—for many interviewees—is bleak. For example, Professor Paul Schulte stated that there has been a “loss of confidence in treaties, declarations and promises for the management of all types of WMD.” Another respondent argued that the currency of nuclear weapons will likely increase as the environment (both ecological and geopolitical) worsens. The fragility of global governance institutions, treaties and agreements thus makes progress in this area more difficult. As Lord David Owen commented, “All together, arms control negotiations to which I have devoted decades of my life have been trashed over the last 5-10 years and it is better to face up to that reality in any discussion of a ‘new agenda for arms control that is multi-domain.’”

Dr Nick Ritchie offered an alternate take on the situation, noting that “over this century there will be a reordering of the global order, which has thus far been largely favourable to the West. In this context, East-West, Cold War nuclear—and partly conventional—arms control has not been failing so much as fracturing.” Ritchie sees this development as “part of changes in the US / NATO—Russia relationship.” His view regarding arms control, and the “practices for controlling the means of violence at regional, bilateral and multilateral levels” is thus that they are “not under threat per se, but they are more difficult.” Whilst some may lament this predicament, Ritchie notes that “arms control has always been difficult and it has always taken time and been hard multilaterally.”

Professor Beatrice Heuser commented that Russia's war against Ukraine will likely drive nuclear proliferation. It is important to consider such points in relation to the impact on public opinion of the Russia-Ukraine war, especially in the nuclear field. Polling evidence suggests that the conflict has made some UK adults who previously supported UK nuclear possession feel more strongly about their position, though this may be a short-term shift.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, polling NET commissioned in 2022 shows that a majority of the UK public are fearful that a nuclear weapon may be used in the near future and support more debate about nuclear weapons-related issues.⁵⁵

In general, survey respondents were pessimistic about the prospects for making progress on nuclear disarmament, not least because of the decline of the international nuclear arms control and disarmament regime. Others, however, were more positive, seeing the potential to rebuild great power relations, and maintain and construct new governance and regulatory regimes out of the rubble of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. If such efforts are to succeed in the future, some respondents argued, cooperation, and confidence-building between states will be key, which as noted above, requires supportive domestic developments.

1.4 Recommendations

On arms control and disarmament (Incremental)

- The UK Government should promote strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction measures, both at meetings of the nuclear weapon states and in other international fora. The UK should outline what progressive steps on nuclear arms control and disarmament it will take to revive the NPT regime, and convene states to consider ways in which AI, cyber and other emerging technology should be regulated to minimise existential risk and prevent arms races.
- To support nuclear arms control and disarmament, the UK should improve the democracy, transparency and accountability of its own nuclear weapons programme. This could include the government providing regular updates and time for parliamentary debates on nuclear weapons procurement and policy decisions.

On arms control and disarmament (Innovative)

- The UK should commit to attending TPNW meetings of states parties as an observer state, and outline the path by which the UK could join the treaty. More ambitious action would also involve the UK revisiting its decisions concerning the modernisation of its nuclear weapons system.

On the Integrated Review process and analysis (Incremental)

- Future UK international policy reviews should give far more weight to the impacts of the climate crisis, including how developments in this area will have complex interactions with other areas of human and national security, such as migration, conflict, and nuclear weapons decision-making.
- The UK's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament should be outlined in the next Integrated Review, including how it is meeting its obligations under the NPT.

On the Integrated Review process and analysis (Innovative)

- The democracy, transparency and accountability of UK international policy-making could be improved by enabling input from the public, civil society, and academics into future international policy reviews.

On the Integrated Review process and analysis (Transformative)

Future UK international policy reviews should include:

- A focus on supporting the creation of a truly multipolar world order based on international law, human security, a strengthened United Nations and the principles of inclusion, social justice and democracy. The UK should partner with progressive states to help it move from an international policy based on control to consent and from military dominance to diplomacy.
- Domestic policies which will support and foster international cooperation, including on environmental issues as well as nuclear arms control and disarmament. This includes, for example, efforts to restructure national economies to prioritise renewable energy and green goods and services, and diversify away from military industry.



Chapter 2: Managing the UK's Major Power Relations

2.1 Question Two

IR2023 states that: "Well-established channels for dialogue and de-escalation with Russia are currently limited and under significant strain, but we remain ready to reinvigorate them when the moment is right. IR2023 also includes a clear articulation of the principles that will underpin the UK's approach to bilateral relations with China, in which the importance of dialogue and diplomacy is emphasised. Ultimately, the UK seeks to re-establish a stable, constructive and frank relationship that can both create better conditions for cooperation and underpin the kind of strategic dialogue required to prevent miscalculation and misunderstanding."⁵⁶

Do you agree or disagree? What sort of relationship should the UK have with China and Russia? How can the UK strengthen diplomacy, prevent the escalation of conflict and reduce nuclear risks?

2.2 Interview Quotes

i) Agree statements

"I agree with what is stated. Handling China and Russia are separate issues and one underlying principle should be, not to do anything to encourage them to come closer together. The Ukraine war has demonstrated to President Xi in an important way that Russia is not a superpower but is now only a medium-sized military and economic power. Nevertheless, it has an effective intercontinental ballistic weapon system or at least we have to presume that is the case, though as the recent failure of the Russian spacecraft to the Moon shows, we may be seeing a deterioration in their expertise in this field as well."

Lord David Owen (Independent Social Democrat; former Foreign Secretary)

"It is hard to see any Russian dialogue bearing fruit under the Putin regime, however. Trust is hard to recover after the Bucha massacre. Dialogue with

Russia must always be backed by the credible readiness to use force. And all such dialogue with Russia and China needs to be carried on with our international partners, with the UK not necessarily playing any leading role."

Lord James Arbuthnot (Conservative Party, former Chair of the Defence Select Committee)

ii) Mixed statements

"The manipulation, and indeed enhancement, of perceived nuclear risk is a core element in Russian state policy. As long as this is the case, the scope for nuclear de-escalation is limited."

Prof Malcolm Chalmers (RUSI, Deputy Director General)

"...in the ultimate, the UK Trident missile submarine force is not independent from our NATO partner the US and could be dispensed with without any change in the east/west balance of nuclear weapon power. At a lower level, prevention of the escalation of conventional weapon conflict requires sufficiently sized and equipped conventional armed forces. The global aspirations of IR 2023 exceed these two parameters. Either the UK redefines itself as a non-global interventionist power or restores its 'global' credibility with a concomitant increase in the armed forces' capability."

Rob Forsyth (Former Royal Navy submarine captain)

iii) Disagree statements

"We acknowledge that channels for dialogue with Russia are currently limited but waiting until 'the time is right' is an admission of being powerless to influence events. We need to be actively exploring ways and means to communicate with Russia and to work with other countries and organisations to open channels of communication. We share the aim to build cooperative relations with China. We would encourage the development of cultural as well as economic links to enhance understanding. Such links must be underpinned by a mutual respect for each other's culture and not be seen as a means of imposing a particular world view."

Deolinda Eltringham (Green Party, Peace, Security and Defence policy working group member)

“Regarding UK relations with China and Russia, the decades since 1990 have been a mishmash of tub-thumping aggression and venal pandering enabling Russian oligarchs and Chinese proxies for the PRC establishment to buy up real estate (land, expensive houses, blocks of flats and offices) and controlling stakes in major industries etc. Either approach is counterproductive. Veering between both is even worse, making British people more insecure, hemorrhaging international respect, and playing into the strategic interests of Putin and Xi.”

Dr Rebecca Johnson (Acronym Institute, Director)

iv) On the UK’s relationship with China and Russia

“The UK could do far more to use its influence with the US and within NATO to reach out to Russia to suggest just such a reinvigoration (in relations with Russia), now. And this may work best if it isn’t simply the well-established channels (such as the tired and dysfunctional NATO-Russia Council), but a new peace conference for Europe. We cannot wait years for resolution on the battlefield...China will need to be drawn into a common security system, but this will only be possible if its leadership is treated with respect and are involved more in that global governance than they have in the past.”

Anonymous

“Currently, the relationship with Russia is understandably dominated by the war in Ukraine, and the UK will have to ensure it does not reward Russia (through normalization of relations, for instance) yet still maintain open channels that can help to de-escalate and reduce nuclear risks. This is a difficult balance, but a focus on de-conflicting at the operational and tactical level, and addressing ambiguities there with mind to crisis prevention and management, should not be inhibited by the ongoing war. In contrast, it may be best to hold off strategic dialogue with Russia until the resolution of the conflict and means to address Russia’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty.”

Anonymous

v) On how the UK can strengthen diplomacy and reduce nuclear risks

“The UK is too invested with USA policy to take a different stance on Russia or China than they do. The war in Ukraine has made it difficult to see how any more positive position will be arrived at in the short term. The best hope for maintaining some level of dialogue about nuclear weapon protocols and even treaties may now rest with the military. It is in their interest to maintain investment in conventional weapons. At a political level in the UK no party (except SNP and Green) wants to even discuss nuclear disarmament internally.”

Baroness Susan Miller (Liberal Democrats; Co-President, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament)

2.3 Interview responses: discussion and context

There was general agreement amongst respondents concerning the ambition expressed in the Integrated Review that the UK should seek to improve relations with Russia and China when the time is right. The main divergence of views concerned the extent to which Whitehall would take into account Moscow and Beijing’s core security interests when shaping its future relations with them. This concern was based on, in several cases, respondents’ assessments of the UK’s geopolitical goals and support for recent military interventions involving the US and NATO.

In terms of what sort of relationship the UK should have with China and Russia, there was broad agreement amongst respondents that Russia and China must be dealt with separately, based on their respective actions, with UK policy calibrated accordingly in response. A number of people argued that the current level of tension between the major powers risks miscalculation that could lead to conflict escalation, including up to the use of nuclear weapons. For these respondents, maintaining high-level diplomatic contacts is therefore necessary to reduce risks and avoid wider conflict. David Cullen thus emphasized the importance of

the UK practicing “strategic patience”. Dr Kristan Stoddart, meanwhile, argued that ongoing interaction between the top leaderships in the US, Russia and China is vital to “avoid silence and mixed messages...consistency and clarity is needed, including to demarcate Western responses and maintain a stable dialogue.”

For those respondents with more mainstream views, Russia is primarily to blame for the decline of the nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament regime. President Putin is seen as culpable for the Ukraine conflict, creating multiple and significant problems for international order as a stalemate has set in. Moscow was also seen by many respondents as acting irresponsibly through its use of nuclear threats, which must be resisted by the UK and its allies. Some summarised the situation as Russia no longer being a reliable or trustworthy partner for the West, and there being no chance of a relationship with the Kremlin as long as Putin is in charge.

Beijing was generally seen by respondents as more responsible, so that a pragmatic relationship is achievable for the UK, balancing commercial interests and human rights concerns, for example. Some saw this approach as being important to prevent China and Russia from joining forces against the West. For those with knowledge of intergovernmental fora, the P5 process was cited as a key venue for nuclear weapon states to discuss nuclear risk reduction. However, one respondent noted that the P5 process is under strain. In addition, short term-measures of importance to stabilise great power relations (raised by a few respondents) include improving crisis diplomacy and conflict prevention mechanisms.

Several respondents, with more critical viewpoints, indicated that whilst UK relations with Russia are at a low point, and current back-channel contacts are unknown, it is important that Whitehall acts with urgency, and is proactive to keep communications open, so that a more cordial relationship with Moscow is eventually re-established. More widely, good communications were seen by some as being essential for the major powers so they are all involved in finding solutions to global issues such as climate change, health (including pandemics), finance and

emerging technology.

One respondent highlighted how supporting young people’s efforts to build cultural ties is one way such relationships could be supported. Lord Des Browne also emphasized the importance of “fostering dialogue and encouraging diplomacy between leaders from across Europe” and investing in the “next generation of leaders.” Some saw future improvements in relations between the UK, Russia and, separately, China, benefiting from track two diplomacy and civil society engagement.⁵⁷

Such efforts may provide an alternative to direct governmental talks. For example, Oliver Robertson argued that “Diplomacy is not exclusively government to government. Citizen diplomacy or people-to-people diplomacy is also relevant. There are ways of projecting soft power which are different from hard power, which is about compellence. Soft power is about being the kind of country others want to be. Being a moral example, being admired. This is important not just in terms of being peaceful, but being that exemplar is important for states in the long term...If someone has good relations with you only because of your military strength, if that strength wanes, this can turn relationships sour. If the way you’re doing things is admirable others are more likely to follow suit and copy your behaviour. Being a good partner inspires reciprocation.”

Others emphasised the UK’s mishandling of relations with both China and Russia. For example, a few respondents noted that UK governments have encouraged Russian and Chinese elites to invest in the UK and have opened up UK institutions to their influence, whilst claiming that the two nations pose serious security threats. These respondents viewed such developments as having a corrupting influence on UK democracy. Notably, a few respondents argued that whilst the UK needs reliable partners, the government also needs to prove that *the UK* is a reliable partner. For example, Lord Arbuthnot stated that “dialogue requires willing partners, able and motivated to speak frankly and to honour the commitments they give. In that dialogue the UK needs to recognise its own capacity for deceit and renegeing on its word (consider the Johnson Government’s willingness to break the

terms of the treaty it signed with the EU), which might enable it better to approach such things with other governments.” Such views are redolent of recent critiques of the British political system, some of which are from analysts with centrist politics, focusing on the UK’s failing institutions and broken social contract.⁵⁸ Dr Stuart Parkinson also argued that the Conservative Government’s decision in 2020 to merge DFID with the FCO was a mistake.

Those respondents with more critical views of the UK’s international policy highlighted a major gap between the UK’s rhetoric and the reality of its actions, arguing that the UK doesn’t currently want de-escalation with Russia, for example. For Professor Andy Stirling, the Integrated Review is thus best seen as a “disingenuous performance”. A common argument from such respondents is that Whitehall acts in line with Washington’s strategic goals, which are focused on strategic dominance, rather than multilateralism and diplomacy. For many of those with critical views, UK support for the US’s containment of China should be challenged. One respondent thus raised the question of whether, and to what extent, the West engages with constructive Russian and Chinese ideas and proposals on regional and international security.

Those with a more critical view of the UK establishment also argued that, to put relations between Russia and the West on a better footing, NATO’s approach needs to be rethought, in particular to better recognise Moscow’s vital security interests. NATO’s expansion up to the borders of Russia was pointed to by one respondent as a key turning point for post-Cold War relations. In addition, for some, the Ukraine conflict needs to be brought to an end quickly, with sizeable support given to reconstruction efforts. Respondents also variously argued that the UK should not exaggerate the China threat (as it is not a neo-colonial power), and not seek total “victory” over Russia in the Ukraine war. Instead, the UK should open up discussions with these states on:

- managing crisis situations;
- managing emerging technology peacefully;
- building inclusive regional security systems.

This will require, it was argued, the UK to resist US pressure, pursue a more independent path, and act constructively within United Nations processes.

Notably, a few respondents argued, post-Brexit, the UK has an opportunity to reshape its security relations and develop its relationships with other allies. Whilst US influence over UK international policy exerts a powerful pull, one respondent stated that US-built global governance institutions are being challenged by states such as China. The question now, this anonymous respondent argued, is thus whether Washington will admit Beijing to the club of powers seeking to rebuild global governance? Critical voices, such as Milan Rai and Professor Andy Stirling, also emphasised the UK’s colonial legacy and the need to honestly reappraise the West’s “dominating” behaviour in relation to the rest of the world, if both democratic forces are to be empowered (including in China and Russia) and a new, more just international system is to emerge.

Another related issue raised by respondents concerns the UK’s position as (or perhaps aspiration to be) a ‘tier one’ military power, and what this means in terms of military spending.⁵⁹ One alternative suggested was for the UK to boost its diplomatic capacity and sacrifice the Trident nuclear weapons system. Another respondent similarly noted that if the UK took steps down the nuclear ladder (which could include both unilateral and multilateral actions) this would signal its peaceful intentions to China and Russia, and London’s sincere commitment to cooperation on disarmament. Elsewhere, Milan Rai argued that the UK should prioritise transparency concerning its nuclear arsenal, making clear where its “red lines” are to adversaries, and what actions might trigger escalation at each level of the deterrence spectrum.

2.4 Recommendations

On education, research and advocacy (Incremental)

- UK civil society groups should conduct research projects to improve their analysis of Russia and China, in particular relating to nuclear weapons,

peace and sustainable security. For example, civil society groups should convene roundtable meetings involving NGO representatives, academics, subject experts and parliamentarians to discuss issues relating to: Chinese and Russian nuclear weapons policies; aspects of the TPNW; and how the UK can revitalise the global nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament regime.

On education, research and advocacy (Innovative)

- UK civil society groups and policy experts should convene meetings with their Chinese and Russian counterparts, when and where possible, to identify: diplomatic options for reducing tensions with the US and NATO members, including on nuclear arms control and disarmament; proposals for ending the Ukraine war, rebuilding affected regions, and maintaining a peace agreement; conflict prevention mechanisms; other cooperation and trust-building measures. Findings from these meetings should be published and shared with national government representatives.

On what sort of relationship the UK should have with China and Russia (Incremental)

- The UK should prioritise maintaining direct, top-level communications with Moscow and Beijing. This should be focused on ensuring that regional and international crises can be managed, if and when they arise, via established diplomatic channels.
- The UK should continually review its trade and business ties with Russian and Chinese companies and individuals to ensure that those who commit human rights abuses and engage in corrupt practices are barred from investing in the UK or benefiting from UK government contracts.

On what sort of relationship the UK should have with China and Russia (Innovative)

- The UK should convene meetings with NATO member states to discuss the alliance's future relationship with Russia and China, and what internal

alliance reforms and policies would support more cordial relations with these nations. The UK should convene meetings with its allies in Asia to discuss ideas for establishing an inclusive regional security architecture that includes China, reduces military tensions and is focused on solving key disputes.

- UK parliamentarians should convene separate meetings involving experts from Ukraine, Russia and other key states to consider how to end the war and discuss options for funding post-conflict reconstruction and regional demilitarisation.

On strengthening diplomacy, de-escalation and reducing nuclear risks (Incremental)

- The UK should invest more resources in its diplomatic capabilities, including conflict prevention and resolution; and in researching the legal and technical aspects of nuclear disarmament, including verification and irreversibility. The UK should ensure there are regular P5 meetings to discuss nuclear risk reduction measures, and provide information to the public on these meetings.

- The UK should provide clarity on its nuclear use doctrine, explaining its 'red-lines' and the logic behind its deterrence policy at each level of escalation, including up to the threat or use of nuclear weapons. This will help build trust and confidence, including amongst other nuclear possessors, concerning the UK's strategic posture and intentions.

On strengthening diplomacy, de-escalation and reducing nuclear risks (Transformative)

- The UK should convene a summit of European states to explore options for regional security systems that are compatible with a European Nuclear Weapons Free/Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone. The UK should support track two diplomatic meetings with top-level representatives from China and Russia to explore these nations' perspectives on how to construct inclusive European and Asian security architectures. Discussion on this topic with Russia should have ending the Russia-Ukraine war as a central goal.

Chapter 3: The Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament Regime

3.1 Question Three

IR2023 states that: “More broadly, the UK will support a new agenda for arms control that is multi-domain, multi-capability and draws together a wider set of actors. We will strengthen the elements of the existing architecture that remain vital – such as the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, and the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The NPT has been the cornerstone of nuclear security and civil nuclear prosperity for the last 52 years, and the UK remains committed to its implementation in full.”⁶⁰

Do you agree or disagree? How can the UK help revitalise the international nuclear arms control and disarmament regime? What might a new agenda for arms control and disarmament look like?

3.2 Interview quotes

i) Agree statements

“Agree. Though what multi-domain arms control looks like isn’t clear, especially when it involves actors not really interested in arms control for the time being. The challenge is tough: more actors and more capabilities than in the past.”

Prof Andrew Futter (University of Leicester, International Politics)

“It’s important not to be too downcast about it, without downplaying the severity of the situation. The BWC, CWC, NPT are still very robust treaties. The norms that they encapsulate are still almost universally accepted...as Russia and Syria have been caught using chemical weapons recently, the backlash for that and the reaction of the international community shows that the taboo is very strong and there’s a determination to maintain that norm--the same is true for biological and nuclear weapons... we’re in a position of strength as far as the underlying norms are concerned...The UK is also trying to

do technical work on the NPT whilst conditions are not propitious, for when the political times are better. Hence our focus on verification, transparency and irreversibility, to be in the position to negotiate good agreements when the window opens again for a world without nuclear weapons, when the time is right.”

Aidan Liddle (UK Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament)

ii) Mixed statements

“A recent Liberal Democrat paper stated that the UK can’t sign the TPNW because it would amount to unilateral disarmament for the UK. However, the TPNW is an interesting initiative. We’ve seen progress in international law before, with efforts under the Ottawa Convention to ban anti-personnel mines. Lots of states signed it. I am optimistic concerning the potential for international law to aid disarmament in the future.”

Richard Foord MP (Liberal Democrats, Defence Spokesperson)

“One cannot fault such aspirations. But “strengthening” these conventions/treaties has proved impossible in the past and will almost certainly continue to be so. It is probably true that the UK wishes to honour its commitment under Article VI of the NPT, but that wish has little value as long as the UK is also determined to keep in step with the other NPT NWS, who are foot-draggers...Any agenda seems likely to be still-born in the absence of a reversal of adversarial trends in major power relationships.”

Peter Jenkins CMG (British Pugwash, Chair; former UK Ambassador to the IAEA)

iii) Disagree statements

“Disagree. This is the usual myopic UK Government approach to weapons of mass destruction: it is other actors—Russia, China, Iran and North Korea—that are regularly criticised by the UK for investing in nuclear and missile capabilities, with little transparency or regard for international norms and

commitments. Of course, there is no mention of the UK's own nuclear weapon modernisation programme (or those of its allies). The assumption is that the UK is a 'responsible nuclear-armed state'. However, the UK has never declassified the history of its stockpile or the actual number of warheads it possesses..."

Dr Ian Davis (personal capacity, Associate Senior Fellow, SIPRI)

"The UK Government has, since 2010 reaffirmed its commitment to the NPT without actually putting any effort or high-level leadership into making sure that the Review Conferences achieve material positive outcomes. The UK Government dismissed the UN TPNW Treaty and would not engage with it quoting the NPT as the only worthwhile game in town."

Baroness Susan Miller (Liberal Democrats; Co-President, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament)

iv) On revitalising the nuclear arms control and disarmament regime

"It is of course important for Britain to remain committed to the NPT, but as nuclear weapons do nothing to keep the world safe at a very high cost we should be active in campaigning for abolition."

Baroness Christine Blower (Labour Party, Patron of Nuclear Education Trust)

"I feel that the UK could help revitalise the international nuclear arms control and disarmament regime through increased intentional engagement with UK civil society and through two subject areas: transparency, and the humanitarian impacts agenda."

Anonymous

v) On a new agenda for arms control and disarmament

"The UK approach to arms control and disarmament is misguided and insincere. The NPT process is moribund with no agreement on progress since 2010. The UK is committed under Article VI to pursue negotiations on nuclear disarmament but has

not done so in the five decades since joining the treaty. At the same time, the UK refuses to engage with the TPNW which seeks to realise the NPT's objective of nuclear disarmament. The TPNW has entered into force and is part of the disarmament architecture the UK refers to in IR2023...If the UK is committed to implementing the NPT in full, then it should end its opposition to the TPNW, publicly endorse it and use its diplomatic resources to persuade the US, France and the other six nuclear-armed states to enter negotiations to join the treaty."

Alistair Burnett (ICAN, Head of Media)

"The UK's security architecture has become unfit for purpose and increasingly dangerous because successive governments failed to acknowledge decades of problems and invest in developing better security approaches, structures, tools, controls and treaties. There are many practical humanitarian, risk-reduction, arms control and disarmament actions that have been advocated for decades, many of which are based on steps that were adopted by the NPT review conferences of 1995, 2000 and 2010, UN First Committee resolutions and the TPNW Action Plan. The relevant steps need to be implemented urgently. It is not enough just to repeat the words."

Dr Rebecca Johnson (Acronym Institute, Director)

3.3 Interview responses: discussion and context

Many respondents disagreed with the IR2023's position on the broad subject of arms control and disarmament, and argued that the UK was, to quote Alistair Burnett, "misguided and insincere". A common point made was that the UK's rhetoric was not matching its actions and that the UK preferred to point fingers at other states rather than critically assess its own track record in this area.

For the minority of respondents who agreed with the statement in the Integrated Review Refresh on this subject, the UK has done all it could to maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent and is acting as transparently as possible given international uncertainty

and tension. Moreover, respondents with similar views argued that the UK has limited reach on the international stage and is responding to the actions of other major powers—such as Russia—whose behaviour undermines international order and prevents cooperation. Ambitious initiatives such as the TPNW are thus seen as politically infeasible or even counter-productive (for those generally supportive of UK government policy) so the focus should be on preserving existing institutions and agreements.

Respondents across a broad range of perspectives stated that existing regimes concerning nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament are under significant pressure. Where they tended to diverge was on what to do about this, and which actors are responsible for the current state of affairs. For example, mainstream respondents emphasised the need for multilateral approaches to arms control and disarmament. Some we interviewed thus see the TPNW as a valuable initiative, but one they ultimately reject because the UK would have to disarm unilaterally if it joined the treaty.⁶¹

The problem of Russia not being a reliable partner was again raised as a key stumbling block—as were the actions of North Korea and Iran. Other establishment voices provided a different view, emphasising that important treaties e.g. on Chemical Weapons are still in place. The UK is also investigating longer term questions, such as the irreversibility of nuclear disarmament, concerning the legal, political and technical requirements of creating a Nuclear Weapons Free World (NFWF).⁶²

According to Dr Nick Ritchie, UK civil servants have thus sincerely explored how to maintain and develop arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament processes over several decades. However, this respondent also noted that the UK has a “political culture that says you can’t be vehemently anti-nuclear and be taken seriously as a potential political leader.” Ritchie pointed to Jeremy Corbyn’s experience as leader of the Labour party, during which time “it was made clear that bending the knee at the altar of nuclear deterrence is a qualifying criterion to be taken seriously as a political leader in Westminster. If you try and stretch the limits of this culture you’ll

get attacked by the right-wing media.”

Elsewhere, former Foreign Secretary Dame Margaret Beckett expressed the “pride” the UK felt at initiating the P5 meetings between the nuclear weapon states. However, the “hope” Beckett felt in office has been replaced by a feeling of “depression” at how “dead” the agenda of scientific and technological cooperation on nuclear issues now feels.

A significant number of respondents argued that the UK should increase its engagement with the TPNW process. Three respondents raised the possibility of the UK attending TPNW meetings as an observer. For example, Dr Ritchie observed that “There’s a common research agenda on verification and irreversible nuclear disarmament that both the TPNW’s scientific advisory group and working groups and the UK and Norway are looking at...UK work in this area is treaty agnostic and is relevant to different processes, including the TPNW...The UK could and should dilute its trenchant opposition to the TPNW given these overlaps...More formally it should consider becoming an observer state of the treaty because the TPNW is becoming part of the institutional architecture which can’t be ignored and is not going anywhere.” Several other respondents argued that the UK should join the TPNW, which would involve a commitment by the UK to eliminate its nuclear weapons. Alistair Burnett noted how wide the support for the TPNW is amongst the international community, with 93 states having signed it.⁶³

Critical voices raised a familiar list of progressive actions the UK could take, including unilateral/multilateral nuclear disarmament measures; signing the TPNW; and controlling arms sales, for example, to human rights abusers, such as Saudi Arabia. For these respondents, the UK may thus claim that it supports a new approach to arms control, but actively prevents progress. Actions by the UK cited by respondents as evidence for this included:

- false claims that the TPNW undermines the NPT;
- being a leading arms exporter;
- cloaking its security policy in secrecy;

- pushing forward with the AUKUS deal;
- pursuing nuclear weapons modernisation, and
- increasing the nuclear warhead cap from 180 to 260.⁶⁴

Arms control and disarmament, some argued, is thus an afterthought for the UK, with nuclear deterrence firmly at the centre of its security policy. Notably, some respondents—who otherwise opposed UK arms transfers—supported efforts to supply military equipment to Ukraine.

Dr Rebecca Johnson pointed out that, over recent decades, numerous thoughtful proposals for action in these areas have been made by NGOs and experts. However, experienced civil society representatives lamented the UK's track record on arms control and disarmament and argued that current proposals from the government were "empty". Moreover, another respondent argued that a recent legal opinion showed that the UK was in breach of its obligations under the NPT.⁶⁵ To revive arms control and disarmament, some respondents therefore argued that the UK could: de-alert its nuclear weapons; provide a timetable for disarming; support action to bring the CTBT into force and the commencement of negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT).

The NPT had significant support from respondents, but there were also several criticisms of it. For example, some argued that the NPT entrenched nuclear inequality between the 'have' and 'have not' states, benefiting the established international powers. There was thus notable pessimism about the state of the NPT as an institution, which some saw as being in a worse state than a decade ago. Overall, the NPT's recent problems are, for one respondent, directly linked to international tensions, so great power relations need to improve if the treaty is to prosper and be strengthened in the future.

Indeed, a few respondents noted that since 2009-10 (and US President Barack Obama's rhetorical support for a NFWF, including in his Prague speech) the NPT had been "moribund" and suffered from a series of "failed" review conferences.⁶⁶

Milan Rai and Baroness Natalie Bennett argued that any new agenda must therefore not entrench existing inequalities but be based on a fairer political settlement between nations. There was also some concern over the push for new nuclear power undermining non-proliferation efforts.

Several proposals were made for what a new agenda might include given the challenges presented by the prevailing geopolitical situation. For example, technical innovations, including on nuclear disarmament verification and inspection regimes, could be beneficial. Others highlighted the importance of the UK working multilaterally with international institutions such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and UN to control offensive weapons, and limiting arms exports.

Another opinion advanced was that future arms control and disarmament regimes should include other emerging technologies (AI/cyber/quantum/relating to Outer Space/Biotechnology), address the proliferation problems posed by small arms and cluster munitions, and, in Mark Fitzpatrick's words, be less "nuclear-centric", with the caveat that nuclear weapons "deserve the highest priority". However, more than one respondent felt that incorporating new technologies into existing regimes would be difficult, especially with the proliferation of capabilities and actors. Dr Kristan Stoddart also highlighted the problems involved in "linking everything together" as the IR2023 seeks to do on arms control. Regarding the cyber domain and the "uses and misuses of technology", Stoddart argued that it was important to "carefully separate the cyber component out...a cyber arms control treaty is more difficult to arrive at than the others, for example, because of the lack of visibility, with verification much more difficult." Stoddart went on to argue that "AI is a global humanity issue. We need to think and reason through this issue very carefully, especially when AI is allied with quantum technologies. This is potentially a step change. AI or quantum may be able to break the current encryption of nuclear weapons codes. This poses a risk to nuclear command and control and targeting."

If new treaties are too difficult to negotiate and enforce then codes of conduct, political agreements

and strengthened norms were advocated by one respondent as a means of ensuring responsible state behaviour. Professor Paul Schulte meanwhile, argued that the INF Treaty collapsed “due to unsatisfied NATO suspicions of Russian non-compliance,” the New START treaty “will expire in 2026, and there are no publicly disclosed nuclear negotiations in prospect between Western countries and China and Russia.”

According to one respondent, an important way the UK can move in a more progressive direction would be to commence a democratic, public debate on nuclear weapons and related issues, which could then enable it to lead on these issues internationally. The argument advanced here is that to break the temptation to pursue policy continuity, political will must be summoned for a new approach that will change mindsets both inside and outside of government. Engaging civil society and academic expertise would help the UK Government and Parliamentarians make the most of efforts to communicate with voters on these issues.

3.4 Recommendations

On a new agenda for arms control and disarmament (Incremental):

- When the UK next chairs the P5 process, it should ensure that crisis stability between the major powers and the avoidance of arms races are prioritised. Such efforts need to be backed up by actions, including for example, on transparency, concerning the UK’s nuclear use doctrine and its red lines on force escalation and deterrence options.
- The UK should also reinvigorate the step-by-step approach to nuclear disarmament by convening states to discuss how an FMCT and CTBT can eventually enter-into-force, including by finding an appropriate venue for negotiations.

On a new agenda for arms control and disarmament (Innovative):

- The UK Government should build on the 2023 Artificial Intelligence summit held in London, the

2023 UN resolution on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (AWS), and the UN Secretary General’s 2023 Agenda for Peace, by convening meetings of states to discuss the international regulation of emerging technology, including on a legal instrument to ensure meaningful human control over weapons systems when using force.

- In addition, the UK should improve democratic oversight and control concerning the use of military force overseas and military spending.

On UK engagement with the United Nations (Innovative):

- The Government should invest political capital in reviving multilateral processes. This could involve promoting the democratisation of the UN Security Council and advancing the UN Secretary General’s Agenda for Peace.

On the UK adopting ethical international policies (Innovative)

- The Government should put measures in place to monitor the end use of arms transfers to ensure they are in accordance with international human rights law.
- The UK should take part in meetings of states parties to the TPNW as an observer, and commit to transparency concerning its nuclear weapons policies—including acquisition, deployment, declaratory, and use.

On the UK adopting ethical international policies (Transformative):

- The Government, and the main political parties, should review the UK’s arms export policies, with the goal of significantly limiting the arms trade, for example, to prevent sales to human rights abusers and states operating outside international law.
- The UK should outline a timebound process by which it will join the TPNW and implement its commitments under the treaty.

Chapter 4: The UK's Global Roles and Responsibilities

4.1 Question Four

IR2023 describes the UK's ambition to "shape the international environment", with a primary focus on the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, as well as the Middle East and Africa. The document therefore recommends that the UK maintain its relationships with key allies, such as the US and France, Israel and the Gulf states, as well as developing stronger ties with countries such as India, Japan and Australia.

The IR2023 also states that: "In particular, we will move the AUKUS partnership to the implementation phase, equipping Australia with conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine capability, and progressing cooperation on advanced military capabilities."⁶⁷

Do you agree or disagree? How can the UK use its international relationships to further nuclear non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament? What is your view on the AUKUS partnership?

4.2 Interview quotes

i) Agree statements

"I strongly support the AUKUS partnership. The particular challenges the RAN faces in the Pacific region require the unique long-range self-sustaining endurance capabilities of nuclear submarines. However, there are significant challenges in achieving this."

Rob Forsyth (Former Royal Navy submarine captain)

"The UK has a demonstrated history of using international relationships to further non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament. This includes its longstanding collaborative partnership with Norway (and later Sweden and the United States) on issues of nuclear disarmament verification, and more recently on concepts of irreversibility in nuclear disarmament. This also includes, inter alia, its

engagement in the Nuclear Security Summit series, the International Partnership on Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPDNV), and the US-led Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament initiative. As mentioned in the previous answer, relationships with key allies and others can help drive necessary action among like-minded states that can bolster existing international efforts in non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament."

Anonymous

ii) Mixed statements

"A 'shaping' ambition that is beyond us. The UK needs to be more realistic and less bombastic in describing its role. But obviously we need to develop as strong a set of relationships as we can. The AUKUS relationship (although clumsily announced) is a positive development and a welcome change of direction for Australian defence."

Anonymous

"Regarding the Middle East region, I believe the UK should review its relationship with Israel where possible, and work alongside allies such as European states and the US to find entry points for Israel to enter the NPT as a member state, and to participate in external discussions around the WMD Free Zone in the Middle East..."

Anonymous

"While I had some initial doubts about the way the AUKUS agreement was completed and some doubts about the cost-effectiveness of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia, I am persuaded that they will contribute usefully in the long term to addressing future threats from China and that the nuclear fuel will be handled in a way that is consistent with IAEA safeguards. I do think that France could have been included in the deal, including French technology using low-enriched uranium fuel."

Mark Fitzpatrick (personal capacity, IISS Associate Fellow; US Foreign Service Officer)

iii) Disagree statements

“Much of the world colonised by the UK is damaged and reparations are required – countries were stripped of their wealth and are now disrespected. Treating people/countries with respect is right... We should admit that the UK has no real leverage with the USA – no such thing as the special relationship. We should still push them to be a responsible global player.”

[Baroness Natalie Bennett \(Green Party, former Leader\)](#)

“Having more emphasis on a British military with global reach is counterproductive. It doesn't mean improving diplomacy and overseas aid. We have seen cuts in these latter areas and virtually all the money was put into the military budget. Mainstream media in the UK has not reported this. This will lead to greater military confrontation. Nuclear arms control suffers as the message is that military might is what counts. This feeds into instability rather than an environment for arms control.”

[Dr Stuart Parkinson \(Scientists for Global Responsibility, Executive Director\)](#)

“Whilst our sister unions in manufacturing may see AUKUS as a pipeline to maintain well paid and skilled jobs, as a public service union we question whether Australian public services would suffer as a result of increased militarisation.”

[Sampson Low \(UNISON, Head of Policy\)](#)

“I have no sympathy whatsoever for the UK's ‘ambitions to “shape the international environment”’. I think its record on such efforts is a record of criminality, harm, exploitation, oppression and cruelty. The current UK government clearly plans more of the same. With specific respect to AUKUS, this effort will do nothing to establish, build or maintain security in the region.”

[Anonymous](#)

“The AUKUS partnership – which China, understandably, sees as destabilising their interests – is to be condemned for its morally indefensible and legally dubious introduction of nuclear technology in spite of assurances from UK officials (including

to me personally) that because the technology for the Australian arm is only for non-nuclear-weapon-bearing submarines, there would be no risk of proliferation of nuclear weapons. There are better ways of furthering China/UK relations.”

[Dr Frank Boulton \(Medact, former Chair\)](#)

“My view of the AUKUS partnership is negative: it would have been more natural for Australia to go with France that has possessions in the area, and was steering a third course away from the negative trend towards lining up the states of the world in two inimical camps.”

[Prof Beatrice Heuser \(University of Glasgow, International Relations\)](#)

4.3 Interview responses: discussion and context

Several respondents, both those from more mainstream and more critical positions, questioned the UK's ability, as a medium-sized power facing economic difficulties at home, to shape the international environment alone. It was also commonly felt that the UK's ambitions and purported reach did not match its capabilities. For example, one view was that the UK should focus on the Euro-Atlantic region, rather than try to project power into Asia. Partly this is because of the limited capacity of the overstretched Royal Navy. Another respondent pointed out that the UK also had limited leverage in terms of influencing China and Russia on nuclear arms control and disarmament.

At the same time, critical voices emphasised the many cooperative actions, utilising diplomacy, that the UK could take to improve global justice and human security, including by:

- increasing the aid budget;
- closing tax havens;
- providing financial support to states affected by climate crises;
- establishing a more cautious and critical relation-

ship with countries with poor human rights records (such as Israel and Saudi Arabia); and

- promoting a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone.

In addition, one arms control expert highlighted the UK's track record of international collaboration on disarmament verification. The overall point being made here was that the UK should seek to cooperate with other states on the central global security issues of our time, rather than seeking to "shape" the international system to its own ends, particularly through military tools.

In terms of the UK's relationship with the US, a few respondents raised the issue of whether and how the UK can positively influence Washington. As noted in other questions, a key issue here will be who is President after the US election in November 2024. Notably, Alistair Burnett addressed the subject of why the UK's international reach has declined in recent decades, highlighting the UK's economic weakness. Dr Ian Davis and Dr Rebecca Johnson also noted the impact of the UK leaving the European Union, arguing that it made the job of influencing other states more difficult at a time of competing power blocs.

The UK's violent and repressive colonial history was raised as an area that needed to be addressed, for example, via reparations to affected communities in the Global South, including to provide remediation for the impacts of nuclear testing, as outlined in the TPNW. Other experienced analysts highlighted the alternative path pursued by non-nuclear countries including Ireland, involving soft power and diplomacy, which the UK could learn from to engage productively with other states. In addition, progressive international policy initiatives led by Scottish civil society were highlighted by Dr Rebecca Johnson, and Jill Evans also noted the valuable recent output by the Welsh Peace Institute.⁶⁸

There was significant scepticism raised across respondents concerning the need for, and merits of, the AUKUS deal. Several respondents argued that it would militarise the Indo-Pacific region, was part

of US power projection, and was unnecessarily antagonising China. Other critical points raised about the deal included that it:

- sets an unhelpful precedent of removing nuclear fuel from safeguards;
- degrades the NPT and non-proliferation norms;
- lands Australia with a huge spending commitment that will mainly benefit the UK and US arms industry;
- irks France by undercutting its previous arrangement with Australia.

Critical voices therefore proposed that the UK invest in civil goods and services rather than the type of military production exemplified by this deal.

Of those we interviewed who supported AUKUS, UK ambassador Aidan Liddle argued that there had been "an awful lot of wilful disinformation" spread concerning what the deal entailed, by "countries who clearly want to stop or derail the project", and that the UK was acting as a responsible nuclear power. Proponents of the AUKUS deal also argued that it was necessary to boost UK/US capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region, that it would ease the UK's burden of producing nuclear submarines by helping with supply chain issues, and was important for Australia to move from conventional to nuclear propulsion.

But even some supporters of AUKUS worried that the UK Government hadn't presented the deal well and had upset several countries, not just Russia and China, with it. In addition, a few respondents felt that Whitehall would need to ensure transparency and IAEA oversight for AUKUS to prevent nuclear fuel from being diverted to weapons uses, even though Australia denies being interested in this. Engaging with Beijing to explain the non-threatening nature of AUKUS and resolve issues in the South China Sea/over Taiwan would therefore be important, one respondent observed.

Another recent UK-led military project involving international cooperation is the Future Combat Air

System (FCAS). One senior political respondent felt this would boost the UK's presence e.g. in the Indo-Pacific, but others were uncomfortable with the UK developing such advanced weapons systems. For example, one respondent noted how regional militarisation drives conventional and nuclear proliferation. Oliver Robertson also observed that cooperative and progressive steps on nuclear arms control and disarmament (such as the entry-into-force of the FMCT and CTBT) are well known, and should continue to be promoted by the UK.

4.4 Recommendations

On development, poverty and aid (Incremental)

- The UK should recommit to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and mobilise resources to improve its performance against SDG targets. The UK should commit to a timetable to get spending on the international aid budget back to 0.7% of GNI and ensure this is primarily spent in poor and developing countries. The UK should re-establish DFID as a standalone department.
- The UK should commit more resources to diplomacy, including to boost the UK's relationships with EU member states and UN conflict prevention and resolution initiatives.

On the AUKUS deal (Incremental)

- The UK should explain how, and ensure that, the nuclear materials transferred in the AUKUS deal will: be safeguarded by international monitoring and inspections; not be used for proscribed military purposes; not be enriched or reprocessed by Australia; be disposed of responsibly.⁶⁹ The project costs should continually be scrutinised to avoid overspending and minimise costs and risks for the Australian government. China should be engaged in discussions over its security concerns regarding the deal.

On the AUKUS deal (Transformative)

- The next UK Government should review the AUK-

US deal and consider all options, including withdrawal. This could form part of the next Integrated Review consultation process.

On the UK's relationship with the US (Innovative)

- The UK should prioritise its security, economic and diplomatic ties in the Euro-Atlantic region. The UK should maintain good relations with Washington, but focus on developing stronger ties with its European partners, based on an ethical, progressive and multilateral approach to international policy.
- The UK should prepare plans for how it can diverge from Washington on international policy, especially if a future US President pursues a more aggressive and unilateralist approach. This should be done to minimise any economic and security impacts, for example, by diversifying the UK's central relationships to encompass other states and actors, including the European Union.

On human rights, conflict and international relationships (Transformative)

- The UK should consider a range of diplomatic and economic actions against states involved in human rights abuses, war crimes and other illegal activity, including sanctions and the suspension of trade deals, as appropriate. The UK should apply consistent standards across its international relationships, based on protecting human rights and observing international law.

On learning from other countries' example (Innovative)

- The UK should study the international policies and strategic assessments of other middle-ranking powers, and countries it has strong ties with (including Ireland, and the Scottish and Welsh Governments), to identify ways of transitioning to a more pacific and multilateralist approach to international affairs, which is compatible with international law.

Chapter 5: UK Nuclear Weapons Policy

5.1 Question Five

The 2021 Integrated Review announced that the UK's nuclear warhead stockpile ceiling would increase to 260 warheads. That document also stated that the UK would "no longer give public figures for our operational stockpile, deployed warhead or deployed missile numbers".⁷⁰ IR2023 states that: "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."

IR2023 also states that: "We would consider using our nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO allies. Only the Prime Minister can authorise their use. The UK's negative security assurance remains unchanged."⁷¹

Do you agree or disagree? What does possessing a minimum, credible, independent nuclear deterrent mean for the UK in 2023 and beyond, and are there alternatives? What changes, if any, should be made to the UK's nuclear weapons policy?

5.2 Interview quotes

i) Agree statements

"I largely agree. I considered in the early 2000s the value of abandoning our nuclear deterrent, and thought then and think now that to do so would send the wrong message to potential aggressors such as Putin. Where I disagree is on the issue of the conventional deterrence that in my view needs to be maintained alongside the nuclear deterrent. I consider we have permitted our conventional deterrence to be eroded to such an extent that it undermines the credibility of our nuclear deterrent."

Lord James Arbuthnot (Conservative Party, former Chair of the Defence Select Committee)

"The IR doesn't mention transparency but it doesn't need to because it is doing transparency. There

aren't many countries that talk about the number of warheads that they will have in their stockpile, or put a ceiling on that. Not many countries tell you how many submarines they have and exactly how the deterrent is deployed...The risk reduction dialogue is about this...Transparency is important both to be accountable to the UK public and parliament, and to international partners in arms control and disarmament...Transparency is also the underlying principle for negotiating arms control and disarmament."

Aidan Liddle (UK Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament)

ii) Mixed statements

"...we do understand at this particular time and in the current climate the UK's wish to maintain a minimum credible, independent UK nuclear deterrent, assigned to the defence of NATO. We recognise and understand the need for the UK to continue to fulfil its security responsibilities to its own population and to its allies, as well as remaining a moderate and progressive voice with respect to this issue, on the international stage."

Anonymous

iii) Disagree statements

"I disagree. This is the issue on which I diverge from UK nuclear policy. Global circumstances required neither an increase in the upper limit of the stockpile or a reduction in transparency. These changes reversed the direction of Britain's gradual move over the past couple of decades in the direction of reducing the saliency of nuclear weapons."

Mark Fitzpatrick (personal capacity, IISS Associate Fellow; former US Foreign Service Officer)

"Regarding the UK's nuclear warhead numbers, I don't know the reason for lifting the cap. I have asked former senior civil servants about this, but I am still not clear on the rationale or the operational military reason. I think the UK's adversaries will choose to regard this move as escalatory. The UK is, however, not acting in a vacuum. We have seen increases in other states' nuclear weapons

stockpiles in recent years, including China and Russia. Trident is so destructive that 180 warheads would wreak incredible devastation. Pointing to the Moscow Criterion, and Russia's improved ballistic missile defences, isn't satisfying as an explanation for raising the cap. The UK nuclear forces are for deterrence, rather than being an instrument of war-fighting doctrine. So the decision was probably more to do with having a degree of parity and increasing the UK's nuclear weapon stockpiles in line with our adversaries. The Liberal Democrats view the UK's nuclear stockpile increase as inconsistent with the NPT and we therefore oppose it."

[Richard Foord MP \(Liberal Democrats, Defence Spokesperson\)](#)

"Disagree. There is no minimum, credible or independent nuclear deterrent. Nuclear weapons ensure the breakdown of all law and order and are an existential threat to us all. The UK should immediately state that there is no way any UK nuclear weapon or US nuclear weapon on its territory could ever be used in any proportional or lawful manner and that instead creates a security problem in and of itself. Therefore the UK will slowly and carefully dismantle them. Instead they will commit to purely defensive methods to ensure the security of the UK by working to train the UK population in nonviolent peaceful conflict resolution and ways to protect themselves from any invasion forces."

[Anonymous](#)

[iv\) On the UK possessing a nuclear deterrent, and the alternatives](#)

"The rhetoric around a minimum, credible and independent nuclear deterrent is misleading and based on questionable assumptions. For instance, it is hard to believe the UK would use its nuclear weapons without the approval of the United States, so how independent is it really? Secondly, deterrence theory is based on an unprovable assertion that it has prevented nuclear weapons from being used again in conflict when we know that it was luck and the decisions of individuals prepared to resist pressure from others and/or established procedures being in the right place at the right time that prevented nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis

(Arkipov) and in the early 1980s (Petrov)."

[Alistair Burnett \(ICAN, Head of Media\)](#)

"The most deceptive phrase in the IR is the one most used i.e. 'deterrence'. There is a public understanding of what deterrence is. Namely, a relationship with a nuclear armed enemy. Deterrence is a threat to launch a second strike in response to first use by a nuclear armed opponent. Deterrence is about protecting the homeland. This is understood as UK nuclear weapons being targeted at a nuclear-armed enemy, with use policy centring on a second strike in response to a first strike, thus protecting the homeland. When the peace movement doesn't challenge this conception of deterrence, we reinforce this propaganda device, which is the most important one existing in the UK. Deterrence has a much wider range of meanings in the UK security community. Second strike is a meaning, but there are many other meanings in the MOD. One of them is sub-strategic deterrence i.e. we need to have a low yield warhead on a single Trident missile we can fire at an opponent to signal to them that we can launch a small attack even if they don't have nuclear weapons as Iraq didn't in 2003, in a range of different circumstances, including if an opponent uses chemical or biological weapons against a British expeditionary force."

[Milan Rai \(Peace News, Editor\)](#)

[v\) On changes to the UK's nuclear weapons policy](#)

"As no legally-binding international treaty containing negative security assurances exists, despite repeated calls by a number of non-nuclear weapon states, the UK policy of 'negative security assurance' actually undermines any sense of security that states denying their own nuclear weapons might gain, and reinforces the misconception that possessing nuclear weapons will deter aggression by potential enemies. A straightforward 'no-first-use' policy under any provocation would go a long way to offer such securities."

[Dr Frank Boulton \(Medact, former Chair\)](#)

“While the SNP’s position is obviously that the only change made to the UK’s Nuclear Weapons policy is their abolition, we would settle at this moment in time for more clarity and honesty about the cost, and more democratic oversight and scrutiny: for example, after many years on the Defence Select Committee, there have been precious few opportunities to examine the costliest and most prominent facet of UK Defence.”

Martin Docherty-Hughes MP (Scottish National Party, Shadow Defence Spokesperson)

5.3 Interview responses: discussion and context

Several voices from across the political spectrum lamented the UK’s decision to increase the nuclear warhead stockpile cap, seeing it as part of an aggressive posture towards Moscow, and potentially Beijing and with no military logic. Experienced and knowledgeable respondents felt in the dark as to why this decision had been taken. Some argued that it may be a response to improved missile defences around Moscow, increases to Beijing’s nuclear warhead stockpile, or for domestic political reasons—but this remains unclear.⁷² Others argued the move was detrimental not just to the UK’s reputation and previous track record in this area—in addition to nonproliferation norms—but British democracy more generally. Yet the official line is that further explanation of this decision will not be forthcoming.

In defence of the decision to increase the warhead cap, mainstream respondents highlighted the need to respond to a febrile security environment. Professor Malcolm Chalmers outlined how UK government policy is placing a greater emphasis on deterrence following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In addition, others argued that the increase was not significant and much less than quantitative nuclear expansion by other nuclear weapon states, particularly China. Defenders of UK policy also argued that the UK was more transparent than other nuclear possessors and that NATO was bolstered by the UK’s recent nuclear decisions. Other respondents, however, such as Lord Des Browne,

argued that “deterrence is fallible”, whilst critical voices, such as Dr Ian Davis, argued that nuclear deterrence is a “dangerous idea” for the UK to cling to. Such comments show that the effectiveness and value of nuclear deterrence, and the postures of nuclear possessors, are under particular scrutiny from security analysts (working inside and outside the major powers) following Russia’s invasions of Ukraine since 2014.⁷³

Critics of UK nuclear possession highlighted the opportunity costs of modernising Trident, especially as the UK emerges from the impacts of austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic, and given the Russia-Ukraine conflict. A common view of pro-disarmament voices was that money should be spent on healthcare and education rather than new nuclear weapons. It was also felt that war in Ukraine and the Middle East would increase public support for nuclear possession, yet government secrecy will prevent a meaningful debate on this. Critical voices also drew attention to how IR2021 suggested that there could be an expanded role for the UK’s nuclear weapons in the future. Some respondents therefore argued that the UK needed to provide meaningful negative security assurances to non-nuclear weapon states.

In addition, respondents with more critical views argued that there is insufficient focus on nuclear weapons issues and UK government choices in the British media. For example, Dr Frank Boulton highlighted the risks of nuclear winter following the use of even a relatively small number of nuclear weapons.⁷⁴ Parliamentarians we interviewed also expressed frustration at their inability, over several years, to get straight answers from the government on nuclear and security policy. Recent decisions by the UK government have therefore further reduced democratic oversight of the nuclear enterprise, according to many we interviewed.

The UK’s move away from transparency over its nuclear stockpile and overall policy was roundly criticised, including by some who otherwise support government policy in this area. Defenders of the need for nuclear ‘ambiguity’ highlighted the deteriorating international security environment and argued that it supported deterrence at a time of rising risks. One arms control expert we interviewed

noted that the UK has emphasised the importance of transparency in its official working papers for NPT meetings, and should act accordingly.

A number of interviewees rebutted the UK Government's claim that the Trident system represents a credible, minimum, independent nuclear deterrent. This, it was argued, is both because the UK relies on the US for nuclear technology and materials, and because Trident's deterrent value is limited. Milan Rai also emphasised that the meaning of nuclear deterrence for the UK is not properly understood. This is because top decision-makers understand it to have a wider, extended application, protecting the UK's overseas interests and ability to project power globally. Yet the British public tend to understand UK nuclear deterrence as solely focusing on deterring a first strike against the British Isles.⁷⁵ The difference in understanding between the public's general view of the role of the UK's nuclear weapons—and what deterrence means—and how elites use these weapons on the world stage, is a key barrier to building political support for progressive, disarmament-oriented policies.

The UK's special nuclear relationship with the US (including the 1958 UK/US Mutual Defence Agreement, which is set to be renewed at the end of 2024) was the subject of significant criticism from respondents. For example, the point was raised that the UK is dependent on US equipment, research and technical support to reproduce the British Trident system. The US has supported Britain's nuclear programme by providing a range of essential hardware and assistance with nuclear material. For example, the UK's new nuclear warheads and Dreadnought class submarines will borrow from US designs, and the UK leases its ballistic missiles from the US.⁷⁶ In addition, the UK's nuclear force, one respondent argued, does not add anything to NATO nuclear capabilities and thus has little or no deterrent value in relation to Russia.

Furthermore, the possibility that the US will once again base nuclear weapons on UK soil was vocally opposed by several respondents.⁷⁷ Notably, former UK ambassador, Peter Jenkins, argued that the UK could rely on the US nuclear umbrella if it jettisoned Trident. Moreover, according to this respondent, the

UK could investigate how it could replace nuclear with conventional deterrence, though others, such as Professor Andrew Futter and Professor Paul Schulte, noted the high costs this could incur and that it is politically unlikely.

Proposed practical steps the UK could take to move down the nuclear ladder raised by respondents variously included:

- adopting a No First Use policy;
- giving meaningful security assurances to non-nuclear weapon states;
- being clearer about what 'extreme circumstances' would lead the UK to consider using its nuclear force;
- ending Continuous At-Sea Deterrence;
- stopping its deployment of nuclear weapons;⁷⁸
- signing the TPNW;
- moving to a non-offensive defence strategy;
- outlining what conventional forces could eventually replace nuclear deterrence; and
- advocating for NATO reform and reducing the role of nuclear weapons in the alliance's security policy.

Dr Nick Ritchie provided another alternate option for the UK, stating that "one thing you can do is, if you build four Dreadnought hulls, convert them to SSGNs. BAE Systems and its workforce arguably doesn't care if nuclear missiles are deployed on the submarines, it's not invested in the deterrent mission in principle, but it wants to build nuclear-powered submarines and has an interest in retaining that capability. If a future government decided to get out of the nuclear weapons business but considers the ballistic missile submarines as assets given sunk costs...they could convert the SSBNs to do different things with the launch tubes. I think the Royal Navy would support this as they could use this capability."

In addition, for opponents of UK nuclear possession, proposals to review decision-making processes on the use of nuclear weapons merit consideration. For example, Oliver Robertson noted that “Because one of the risks with nuclear weapons is about the weak point in the chain, if you’re going to have an authorisation mechanism, it would be better to have multiple people involved in it, rather than an individual decision-maker e.g. a Prime Minister, to have people to sense check authorising nuclear weapons use, as this is a critical decision, with potentially catastrophic consequences... Ideally, we need to move away from the high level of secrecy involving nuclear weapons and to a high level of openness and the sharing of information and control.”

Supporters of the UK’s nuclear force argued that it was at a minimum level, that it contributed to the maintenance of global order, and that it would be more expensive to eliminate than retain. At the same time, there was some anxiety expressed across respondents regarding the current state of the UK’s nuclear arsenal, for example, because of ageing submarines, problems with maintenance, delays in developing nuclear facilities and infrastructure, and significant cost overruns. The UK’s political class, one anonymous respondent argued, may ultimately lack the knowledge and will required to keep the nation’s nuclear enterprise up and running.

Notably, the UK’s nuclear deterrence strategy is seen by top decision-makers as one part of a much wider spectrum, on top of which sits Trident. A key question (for elites and those who support the UK’s nuclear policy) is whether the other parts of the UK’s deterrence system, including conventional military and economic tools, are functioning effectively. For some respondents, the ballooning budget for developing and maintaining the UK’s nuclear arsenal takes resources away from the conventional defence budget. This is a problem because a certain degree of conventional military capability is needed to support a credible nuclear deterrence posture, whereby the UK can escalate its use of force up to nuclear detonation. A few respondents thus felt that more resources needed to be committed to conventional military spending to ensure the UK’s deterrence strategy—as a whole—is credible.

Given current resource constraints, Whitehall decision-makers are faced with deciding where cuts to the defence budget should fall, or must find extra money (including from making big savings elsewhere) which is difficult at a time of fiscal discipline. For those we interviewed who are opposed to nuclear possession, the answer to this problem is nuclear disarmament and the diversion of resources to conventional military needs, or civil goods and services. Nuclear proponents we spoke to naturally wanted the MOD to receive more money, including to plug funding gaps for conventional equipment and weapons purchases.

5.4 Recommendations

On the UK’s nuclear weapons policy (Incremental)

- The UK should reverse the nuclear warhead cap increase and return to the previous goal of reducing its total number of warheads to 180, as outlined in the 2010 Defence Review.
- The UK should commit to transparency over its defence nuclear enterprise (including acquisition, maintenance, deployment and nuclear weapons use policy) as a contribution to the renewal of the NPT and a more democratic security policy.

On the UK’s nuclear weapons policy (Innovative)

- The UK should give credible negative security assurances to non-nuclear weapon states, meaning that it will not threaten to use, or use, nuclear weapons against them. The UK should also pursue a legally binding agreement on negative security assurances with other nuclear possessors.

On the UK’s nuclear weapons policy (Transformative)

- The UK should reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in its security policy, including by: moving to a No First Use posture (and/or stating explicitly that it would only use nuclear weapons if the sur-

vival of the State was at stake); ending continuous at-sea deterrence; reducing nuclear warhead numbers.

- The UK should ensure that the nuclear weapons component of the alliance is reviewed at the next meeting of NATO members, including proposals for a timetable for removing so-called 'tactical' US-owned nuclear weapons from Europe.

On parliamentary action (Incremental)

- The UK's political parties should use existing processes and groups, such as the Defence Select Committee, to hold inquiries into the rising costs and risks involving the UK's nuclear weapons programme. Regular parliamentary time for debates on and oversight of the UK's defence nuclear enterprise, military spending and overseas military deployments should be established, focused on providing meaningful scrutiny.
- Governmental transparency regarding possible plans to again station US nuclear weapons on UK soil and on renewing the Mutual Defence Agreement is particularly necessary at this time.

On parliamentary action (Innovative)

- The next Government should appoint a Minister focused on promoting: internal reforms to military procurement, including: defence diversification; nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament measures; democracy, accountability and transparency regarding decision-making on the use and deployment of the UK's armed forces, nuclear weapons, and defence spending more widely; the prioritisation of human rights over commercial interests in UK international policy.

On the UK's defence posture (Transformative)

- The UK Government should commission research on how it can transition to a non-offensive defence posture, based on conventional/non-nuclear capabilities. This should include defence diversification measures and investment programmes for regions

and communities affected by the demilitarisation of industry.

- The UK should either drastically scale down or cancel big-ticket defence projects (SSBNs/SSNs/a third aircraft carrier/F-35/Tempest FCAS) and instead invest resources in societal resilience, territorial defence and green technology to decarbonise the economy.
- The UK should develop a defence strategy focused on the principles of common, democratic, human security, utilising conventional capabilities.



Chapter 6: UK Defence and Nuclear Weapons Spending

6.1 Question Six

In IR2023, the UK Government declared an aspiration to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence – up from the current level of 2% – and committed £5 billion of additional funding over 2023/24 and 2024/25. IR2023 also states that: “Of this new money, £3 billion will be invested across the defence nuclear enterprise...The remaining £2 billion will allow us to replenish our stockpiles and to increase them in line with a reassessment of appropriate levels... and to invest in the resilience of the UK’s munitions infrastructure.”⁷⁹

Do you agree or disagree? Is the UK Government’s commitment to arms control and disarmament compatible with increased budgets for nuclear weapons modernisation?

6.2 Interview quotes

i) Agree statements

“Yes, you can have both. Arms control doesn’t automatically mean reductions – it’s more about stability/management. The UK is committed to multilateral not unilateral disarmament, so changes in the stockpile/capability are consistent with this. It is also important to spend money to keep what we already have safe and secure. But all this needs explaining and defending publicly by the UK government.”

Prof Andrew Futter (University of Leicester, International Politics)

“I consider the UK Government’s commitment to arms control and disarmament is wholly compatible with increased budgets for nuclear weapons modernisation. For a nuclear deterrent to have any purpose it has to be kept up to date and credible. I believe that the UK should be spending closer to 3% - and preferably more – of GDP on defence, given the current instability in the world.”

Lord James Arbuthnot (Conservative Party, former Chair of the Defence Select Committee)

“Yes, it is entirely compatible given the policy of the UK (unlike the other major nuclear powers) to maintain only a minimum deterrent. The increased budget is what it takes to stay in the game given past delays and underinvestment in nuclear infrastructure.”

Anonymous

ii) Mixed statements

“...an increase in budget does not necessarily mean that the UK is not committed to its stated aims, which are of course very long-term objectives, and as the other questions in this survey have highlighted, are not realistically achievable in the short-term...We also understand that many aspects of a modernisation programme could in fact lead to improved safety in a number of areas.”

Anonymous

“As there is no progress to be made in the area of arms control and disarmament in the foreseeable future, there is no incompatibility.”

Prof Beatrice Heuser (University of Glasgow, International Relations)

“2.5% is a reasonable target but only if we switch expenditure on nuclear weapons to the armed forces and pay and equip them properly with upgraded kit.”

Anonymous

iii) Disagree statements

“The announced money is far below what is needed to shore up the UK’s nuclear weapon upgrades. These upgrade projects are a clear breach of the spirit of the NPT and should never have been embarked upon; they will continue to swallow resources that would be better spent on public wellbeing at a far greater level than is being publicly admitted.”

David Cullen (personal capacity)

“I feel that this increase in budgets for nuclear weapons modernisation is a harmful one. Looking from a ‘human-security’ lens, at a time when the UK is struggling across various social issues- the quality and diminished access to education, the immense rise in poverty and food accessibility, and of course, in a post-pandemic world, the strain on the NHS, the decision to spend further on our nuclear weapon infrastructure, and wider defence, is an irresponsible, unethical, and harmful one.”

[Anonymous](#)

“Disagree. The UK should engage in a fundamental rethinking of security policy focusing on human and common security rather than state-centric security. There should be a rapid cut in military spending, down initially to 1.5% of GDP, primarily being re-assigned to double international development spending with a focus on the transition to rapid decarbonisation.”

[Prof Paul Rogers \(University of Bradford, Peace Studies and International Relations\)](#)

“Disagree/No. Assertions that the economic consequences of British commitments to what they call the defence nuclear enterprise are captured by the declared public spending allocations are mendacious. This is not an inadvertent spin but a deliberately engineered deception. NAO officials involved in reviewing the submarine programme and the civil nuclear programme knew that the economics involved in both hinge on a massive transfer of economic value from electricity consumers over the coming decades valorised in finance for civil nuclear plants now. This trickles down into BAE Systems, Rolls Royce (and similar companies)--the companies forming the British submarine base--which thereby benefited and are maintained in operation. Spending figures on submarines thus only include the cost of each submarine. But the cost of the entire infrastructure/industrial base around that is probably of similar size...The NAO have noted this on nuclear submarines...the costings of the submarines assume that the industrial base is funded from some other source...they are telling us that the rationale for spending on the defence nuclear enterprise is a fiction...This paragraph (in the IR) is an active deception by the British state to maintain

its nuclear capability.”

[Prof Andy Stirling \(University of Sussex, Science Policy Research Unit\)](#)

“Clearly the UK Government’s commitment to arms control and disarmament is NOT compatible with increased budgets for nuclear weapons modernisation...This is especially the case since the UK is a member of a military alliance whose members collectively spent \$1232 billion in 2022 on ‘defence’, or 67% of global military expenditure. The £5 billion in extra military funding would be better spent on enhancing UK resilience and climate mitigation.”

[Dr Ian Davis \(personal capacity, SIPRI\)](#)

“It is striking just how much of the additional defence spend is taken up by the nuclear enterprise. Costs are spiralling on the project, and there’s no guarantee that it will be delivered in a manner that avoids redundancy because of emerging new tech that renders submarines obsolete.”

[Anonymous](#)

“Not only will the worsening position of sterling make the dollar-denominated aspects of the nuclear enterprise much more expensive, there will also be a resulting worsening of the budget on conventional defence to get to grips with as a result, certainly as long as the ‘more money, no questions’ attitude to the nuclear enterprise remains...Especially as pressures on all other public services are forecast to deteriorate, there will surely come a point when the two-party omertà around reform of the whole enterprise is broken.”

[Martin Docherty-Hughes MP \(Scottish National Party, Shadow Defence Spokesperson\)](#)

6.3 Interview responses: discussion and context

Responses to the question of how much the UK should spend on its armed forces generally corresponded to respondents’ views on what the UK’s role in the world should be. For example, for those who would prefer the UK to maintain its traditional posture of global engagement and power projec-

tion, military spending should be maintained or increased. For these respondents, an enlarged Russian threat justifies the UK's increased focus on nuclear deterrence and maintaining an up-to-date and credible nuclear force. Meanwhile, those who favour the UK moving to a more modest defence posture, focused on the Euro-Atlantic area and human security, generally prefer the UK to divert resources from military spending to civil goods and services, and increase spending on addressing the climate emergency.

Certain defenders of UK nuclear possession we spoke to argued that to ensure the safety and surety of the Trident nuclear weapons system, increased investment was necessary. Such respondents emphasised the need to upgrade the UK's nuclear infrastructure which, they argued, had suffered from years of underfunding and poor decisions. These investments, it was claimed, would also have wider benefits for the UK economy—though this was strongly disputed by pro-disarmament voices. Some of those we spoke to who oppose UK nuclear possession, also emphasised the importance of safety. For example, Dr Nick Ritchie stated that “any state that has nuclear weapons should spend what it needs to make sure the weapons are safe. Some of this will be ensuring that the facilities we build, the warheads we make, the submarines we design, the reactors we produce are as safe as possible... There are dangers in underfunding a nuclear weapons complex if it increases risks of safety incidents. Where that line is is very difficult to say, but we can support the principle of ensuring safety without tacitly legitimising the existence of nuclear weapons”.

In addition, some argued that military/nuclear spending can contribute to strategic stability, to ensure a nuclear weapons system is secure and does not malfunction, and is thus compatible with arms control. Professor Beatrice Heuser advanced a more pessimistic view, arguing that as there is no prospect of progress on international arms control and disarmament negotiations in the near term, the UK's actions in this area cannot be criticised.

Respondents disapproving of UK government policy, such as Deolinda Eltringham, generally disa-

greed with the notion that increased spending on defence and nuclear weapons is compatible with a commitment to arms control and disarmament. For example, several respondents we spoke to highlighted the ways in which UK nuclear rearmament undermines its NPT commitments on disarmament. They therefore proposed that the UK needs to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in its security policy. Others, such as Dr Stuart Parkinson, noted that the UK is a member of NATO, which has enormous military resources—far greater than Russia's or China's—so the UK does not need to add to existing alliance strengths in this area.

A number of the respondents who opposed rising military budgets also highlighted the increasing costs of UK nuclear modernisation. Alistair Burnett pointed out that the UK's nuclear weapons budget is estimated to be £5.4bn (\$6.8bn) per year.⁸⁰ David Cullen argued that announced spending on upgrade projects for the UK's nuclear weapons programme is inadequate, set to increase further, and “should never have been embarked upon.” A prominent SNP MP we spoke to—Martin Docherty-Hughes—highlighted that future increases to the nuclear weapons budget will be driven by rising procurement costs from US suppliers. This, he argued, would likely have knock on effects on the conventional military budget, and was redolent of a nuclear enterprise which must be reformed.

A common argument we heard was that the UK should prioritise civil goods and services, international development, and the green economy over military spending. Others felt that the UK would be better off diverting spending from nuclear weapons to conventional forces, especially given the resources given to Ukraine, which have drained UK munitions stocks. An interesting question here is how the armed forces feel about current spending choices. The question was thus raised, by one respondent, of how military personnel might be engaged in this debate. UK spending on ‘big-ticket’ items—for example, aircraft carriers and other expensive kit—needs parliamentary scrutiny, but MPs and Peers we spoke to felt that the government are not providing Parliament with satisfactory information on defence equipment and weapons costs.

In terms of precisely how much money the UK should be spending on defence, a range of views were advanced by respondents. Critics of government policy argued that the UK should substantially reduce the amount spent on defence, which one activist we spoke to described as “Trumpian”. Professor Paul Rogers argued that the UK should reduce its military budget, “initially down” to 1.5% of GDP. Another analyst, David Cullen, argued that the UK should move away from meaningless targets (based on % of GDP) to determine the defence budget, and focus on human security objectives instead. Others argued that the UK should increase military spending further, for example, to 3% of GDP. Dr Kristan Stoddart posited that this was justified because of the UK’s “hollowed out forces across the spectrum”, at a time when Russia was testing the West. At the same time, Stoddart argued that the UK “needs to be very careful with defence spending to minimise as much as possible project delays and cost overruns...AI and quantum can help out with design and delivery, and the management of budgets and timelines.”

Richard Foord MP argued that the UK needs to be realistic about its role in the world today, as a “medium-sized power”. Foord stated that the UK “can play our most effective role in contributing to the defence of our own region. We have convening power. We must not get lost in nostalgia for the past. We can’t act alone across the globe as though it’s the Victorian era”. Foord also stated that the British army, which will comprise 73,000 personnel by 2025, is currently too small in size. In addition, a few respondents argued that maintaining defence spending at a certain level is necessary to ensure the UK makes a meaningful contribution to NATO and has armed forces which are interoperable with the US.

Those who support alternative spending priorities made several criticisms of the way the UK handles its military spending. For example, Professor Andy Stirling posited that the real costs of the UK being a nuclear weapon state are neither revealed by the government, nor do they include the contribution of the wider civil nuclear energy industry. According to this respondent, this means that the skills and infrastructure needed to maintain the UK’s defence

nuclear programme are being subsidised by investment in the civil nuclear sector. Other critics also argued that the UK’s military-industrial complex (including large defence companies) is overly subsidised by taxpayer money and that this weakens the country.

Dr Nick Ritchie made a related point concerning the difficulty of pinpointing exactly what the UK spends on maintaining its status as a nuclear weapon state, noting that “The difficulty with the phrase ‘defence nuclear enterprise’ is that the MOD attach funding figures to it that cover everything, including the new Dreadnought SSBNs, the warhead programme, continuing investment in facilities at AWE and Raynesway, at Barrow, the building of the SSNs, the naval nuclear reactor programme and so on. So it’s difficult to know what part of that budget is specifically on the weapons programme—probably the majority but it’s difficult to say.”

Another experienced defence analyst noted that the UK’s enormous spending on nuclear-armed submarines may also be pointless as new technology may make submarines obsolete in future. According to this respondent, it is therefore “wasteful and illogical” to base the UK’s security strategy on nuclear weapons carried by submarines alone. Rob Forsyth also pointed to the numerous problems with constructing and maintaining the UK’s fleet of SSNs and SSBNs. The idea of moving from nuclear to conventional weapons systems to provide deterrence was thus raised as an alternative policy option for the UK by a few respondents.

Update on the defence budget—a turning point?

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s £5 billion uplift to the defence budget (for 2023/24 and 2024/25) was far less than the then Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, had lobbied for.⁸¹ In early 2024 military officials (including in the US) called for the UK to increase its defence budget, claiming that the UK would be unable to fight back against future Russian aggression.⁸²

This tone continued with Grant Shapps’ first major speech as Defence Secretary, after succeeding

Wallace. Shapps stated in January 2024 that we are “moving from a post-war to a pre-war world”.⁸³ This was soon followed by comments made by Admiral Rob Bauer, a senior NATO official, that the West should prepare for all-out war with Russia within the next twenty years. Bauer also said that NATO allies needed to build up their capacity to produce weapons to engage in a lengthy conflict. Furthermore, as Professor Andrew Dorman noted, Bauer argued that “governments should be talking to their citizens about mobilisation, more reservists and even conscription”, raising serious concerns over whether we are “heading for World War Three”.⁸⁴

In April, Rishi Sunak pledged to increase UK military spending by £75bn over six years. The planned increase would take military spending to 2.5% of UK GDP. The BBC reported that the Prime Minister “stressed the UK was ‘not on the brink of war’ but claimed the extra money would put the country’s defence industry ‘on a war footing’”.⁸⁵

6.4 Recommendations

On the UK’s defence budget (Incremental)

- The UK Government should provide detailed explanations on the economic and industrial connections between the civil and defence nuclear enterprises so the public and parliamentarians can assess how resources are being allocated, and the merits of alternative energy and defence policy options.

On the UK’s defence budget (Innovative)

- The UK should develop a new way of calculating what level of defence spending is appropriate to move beyond artificial and irrelevant GDP percentage targets.

On the UK’s defence budget (Transformative)

- A new approach to security, prioritising human and environmental needs, should provide funding for areas including: the cost of cleaning up military CO₂

emissions and greening defence infrastructure; building societal resilience and climate change mitigation measures; transitioning to a non-offensive defence posture; defence diversification, demilitarisation and disarmament measures; conflict prevention and resolution; reparations to communities affected by nuclear testing and related harms.

On the UK’s nuclear weapons budget (Incremental)

- Civil society groups should work with parliamentarians and economic experts (including in the US) to identify the causes of significant cost rises to UK military equipment and weapons projects, particularly within the defence nuclear enterprise, and develop alternative policy options.

On the UK’s nuclear weapons budget (Innovative)

- Parliamentarians should lead a public conversation on the relative costs and risks of increasing military spending beyond 2% of GDP, with a particular focus on projected rises to the nuclear weapons budget over the next decade, and options for reducing this.

On the UK’s nuclear weapons budget (Transformative)

The UK Government should:

- Limit any new funding for nuclear weapons spending to keeping nuclear sites and equipment safe and secure (including on submarine decommissioning), pending reductions to the nuclear arsenal and the cancellation of unsustainable projects.
- Conduct studies on how the UK can best transition to former nuclear weapon state status in line with joining the TPNW, including the costs and risks of: decommissioning and dismantling existing nuclear weapons-related capabilities and infrastructure; cancelling contracts with suppliers for Dreadnought submarines/related equipment assigned to or supporting the nuclear arsenal; and transforming defence nuclear industry to civil and green production.

On alternative approaches to defence (Innovative)

- Civil society organisations should bring together groups of concerned citizens with parliamentarians, policy experts, academics, trade union representatives, senior members of the armed forces, and leaders from industry to identify progressive options for UK defence and foreign policy, including demilitarisation and disarmament, that respond to the global climate emergency and rising nuclear risks. This national debate should also identify what essential assets/personnel are required for human security, and what current and planned military equipment and weapons projects are unsustainable or unnecessary.

On alternative approaches to defence (Transformative)

- UK defence structures and requirements need to be rethought to focus on: defending the UK and its people rather than overseas power projection; supporting defence diversification alongside a green industrial strategy; prioritising human resources and societal resilience, rather than hi-tech offensive military capabilities.



CONCLUSION

Following World War Two, the UK had to face the question of what role it should play in the world. As the Cold War set in, Whitehall's answer—which included the acquisition of nuclear weapons, strong support for the US and NATO's military interventions, and the suppression of certain independent nationalist movements—provoked intense political disagreement.⁸⁶ As the discussion in this report has shown, the question of what the UK's approach to defence, diplomacy and disarmament should be remains strongly contested. Yet whilst some familiar controversies persist, developments at home and abroad are creating a new, and extremely complex, set of challenges.

Respondents to our survey have outlined the momentous geopolitical, military, environmental, economic, social and technological changes underway around the world, to which the UK must adapt. In recent years, the UK's international policy has come under increasing stress as internal and external pressures mount. Nuclear modernisation and rearmament are the dominant trends amongst the nuclear weapon states. Moreover, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Gaza-Israel war show that significant regional events can severely worsen prevailing global trends.

It is clear that business as usual is unsustainable and undesirable. This situation raises many far-reaching questions about what direction UK international policy should take, and whether the UK's decision-makers and institutions are providing effective and responsible leadership. The focus of this report has been on the UK government's current strategy, as outlined in the Integrated Review Refresh, which covers many different areas. In response, this study has drawn on a range of expert and informed opinion to present some of the key issues requiring greater debate and discussion if UK policy is to be meaningfully reformed, particularly in ways supportive of nuclear disarmament.

A summary of responses to our survey

As expected, there were several areas of agreement and disagreement amongst respondents to

our survey. The views respondents shared with us often corresponded to their broader worldviews and preferences, for example, concerning whether the UK should remain a nuclear weapon state or not. However, this was not always the case, and there were some notable disagreements and variations in analysis, both between respondents with more mainstream and more critical views on the UK's international policy.

These views were explored across the six chapters of research findings in this report:

Chapter 1. A common view amongst respondents was that as long as Russia's war against Ukraine continues, with no diplomatic resolution in sight, the possible use of nuclear weapons by President Putin will remain and fears of a new Cold War will grow. For many we spoke to, the potential for progress on arms control and disarmament is thus low given the tension and distrust between the major powers. However, a number of positive actions were proposed that the UK could take to build confidence and defuse tension between the nuclear powers.

In terms of global security trends, many respondents argued that the UK should give greater priority to the impacts of climate breakdown. This is because climate-related problems will have many severe and unpredictable consequences, and will likely interact negatively with other issues such as economic stability, migration and conflict.

Chapter 2. In terms of managing the UK's major power relations, respondents gave contrasting views about how the UK should orient itself towards the major powers. Respondents generally agreed that China and Russia should be treated separately and that the UK should seek to improve relations with both states when the time is right. Relations with Russia are likely to be difficult as long as President Putin is in power, however. Those with more critical viewpoints were concerned about the UK pursuing confrontation with Beijing and Moscow and the dangers of rising nuclear risks. Meanwhile, others generally favoured the UK providing more support to Ukraine so that it prevails in the conflict, increasing NATO engagement, and following Wash-

ington's global strategy of 'strategic competition'.

The far-reaching implications for the UK of Donald Trump regaining the US Presidency were highlighted by a number of respondents to this report—and is something UK decision-makers must prepare contingency plans for. Critical respondents thus urged the UK to be more cautious about its relationship with the US, pursue a more independent path, and act in accordance with international law.

Chapter 3. Several respondents noted that, as a party to the NPT, the UK is committed to reducing the number of its nuclear weapons, and reducing their role in its security policies, pursuant to disarmament. Yet the story the UK has had to tell in recent years is one of nuclear modernisation and rearmament. Moreover, mainstream and critical voices acknowledged that global nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament agreements are under significant pressure.

A number of respondents also noted that the TPNW has entered into force, yet the UK did not participate in negotiations on the treaty and categorically stated that it would not sign or ratify it. Those supporting the British government's position argued that the UK should not join the TPNW. An alternative would be for the UK to observe TPNW meetings or take other opportunities to engage in discussions about what transitioning to former nuclear weapon state status would entail for the UK.

Respondents also discussed future arms control and disarmament regimes covering emerging technologies, such as AI, quantum, space technologies, and biotechnology. One respondent felt that incorporating new technologies into existing regimes would be difficult, especially with the proliferation of capabilities and actors. If new treaties are too difficult to negotiate and enforce, then codes of conduct, political agreements and strengthened norms were advocated by one respondent as a means of ensuring responsible state behaviour.

Chapter 4. In terms of the UK's global role and responsibilities, one area of fairly broad agreement amongst respondents was that the Integrated Review Refresh overestimates the UK's ability to influ-

ence world events and that the UK would be better off focusing on security issues closer to home. Rather than pursuing business as usual and prioritising the use of military tools and force to retain influence and control, critical respondents therefore argued that the UK should prioritise diplomacy and multilateralism, in addition to reducing and regulating arms transfers—especially to repressive states.

There was significant scepticism raised across respondents concerning the need for, and merits of, the AUKUS deal, because it would degrade non-proliferation norms, militarise the Indo-Pacific region, encourage US power projection, and antagonise China. Of those we interviewed who supported AUKUS, one notable argument raised was that some actors had provided inaccurate information about the deal and that the UK was acting as a responsible nuclear power in implementing the deal.

Chapter 5. In terms of UK nuclear weapons policy, the decision to increase the UK's nuclear warhead cap, and reduce transparency over nuclear weapons policy, raised particular concern across many respondents. In addition, the fact that the UK's nuclear weapons system—including the deployed Vanguard class submarines and the replacement programme for Trident—is under extreme pressure was highlighted by several respondents. For example, the replacement programme is facing severe cost overruns and delays, raising serious questions about the UK's ability to produce this weapons system.

For those we interviewed who are opposed to the UK possessing nuclear weapons, the answer to these problems is nuclear disarmament, and the diversion of resources to conventional military needs or civil goods and services. However, supporters of the UK's nuclear force argued that it was at a minimum level, that it contributed to the maintenance of global order at a time of instability, and that it would be more expensive to eliminate than retain. Nuclear proponents thus wanted the MOD to receive more money, for example, to plug funding gaps for conventional equipment and weapons purchases.

Chapter 6. In terms of UK defence and nuclear weapons spending, several respondents noted

that, partly as a result of the UK's overblown ambitions and changing economic fortunes, the MOD's equipment and weapons plans are wildly over budget. Critical voices argued that the UK is thus doubling down on military spending when it should be prioritising a green recovery from the Covid pandemic and supporting a global peace dividend.

Those we interviewed who would prefer the UK to maintain its traditional posture of global engagement and power projection argued that military spending should be maintained or increased. For these respondents, an enlarged Russian threat justifies the UK's increased focus on nuclear deterrence and maintaining an up-to-date and credible nuclear force. Meanwhile, those we interviewed who favour the UK moving to a more modest defence posture, focused on the Euro-Atlantic area and human security, generally advocated the UK diverting resources away from military spending, and increasing spending on addressing the climate emergency.

UK international policy: obstacles to and opportunities for progressive change

In addition to providing their analysis of UK government policy, respondents gave us a number of constructive proposals for how the UK can responsibly minimise the salience of nuclear weapons in the UK's security policy in support of disarmament, contribute to the reduction of global nuclear risks, and address the climate crisis. For example, certain respondents argued that to prevent conflicts involving the major powers escalating up to nuclear war and help the world step back from the precipice of climate catastrophe, the UK must act as a nation amongst nations, not beholden only to the US, but building wider partnerships—in Europe and beyond.

Various UK-based NGOs, activist groups, academics and experts—including NET in its previous reports—have consistently advocated, over many years, a range of progressive actions that the UK could take to prioritise human security.⁸⁷ However, successive UK governments have largely turned a deaf ear to calls from civil society for an internation-

al policy based on peace, disarmament, justice and human rights.⁸⁸

The main question, as ever, is thus where the political energy and leadership will come from to ensure such ideas and initiatives move to the centre of policy making. According to a large number of those who responded to our study, the UK's international policy must be opened up to include a much wider range of voices, based on the principles of democracy, transparency and accountability.

Respondents to our survey highlighted the many opportunities available to those wishing to get involved in the political process. Research and awareness-raising amongst both the public, media and decision-makers are key to overcoming cultures of secrecy and elitism. Activism and campaigning, focused on pressuring and persuading political representatives, can also help reform the UK's governing institutions so they become more democratic and responsive to citizens' needs and preferences.

Coupled with external pressure, political leadership and a positive alternative vision are urgently required to fix the UK's institutions and produce both a coherent and progressive international policy. Much greater public and parliamentary scrutiny of the UK's nuclear weapons programme and wider militarisation is needed. This is vital if the UK is to prioritise nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament.

Domestic political obstacles to the UK moving in this direction are well known and were highlighted by several respondents to this study—they include:

- the defence establishment's preference for institutional and bureaucratic continuity;
- the legacy of the colonial past;
- the political and economic influence of the US and NATO on UK policymakers;
- secrecy, and a lack of democratic accountability and oversight;

- a mainstream media that does not accurately report the UK's international behaviour;
- political leader's fixation on the UK maintaining a global military role.

In terms of political opportunities for those advocating a more progressive UK international policy to advance their views, the next twelve months is set to be a momentous period for UK and global politics. The UK General Election will likely take place in Autumn 2024. Notably, a number of other elections will be taking place around the world near this time, including the US Presidential Election. Whichever party forms the next UK Government will likely produce its own defence review. If, as is likely, the UK follows the approach taken by previous reviews, this document will be strongly influenced by political developments and strategic choices in Washington following the Presidential election, as well as by global events. Discussion regarding what direction UK defence and foreign policy should take will intensify within and without government, and this report's findings and recommendations will hopefully be debated and found to be useful.

We also encourage civil society actors in the UK to use this report to identify opportunities to boost support for policies that will get the UK (and the world) back on the path to national and international nuclear disarmament. Public opinion polls clearly show that UK adults would be receptive to progressive policies that challenge the status quo, despite rising fears of world war and attempts by some to influence the public mind to support ever-increasing military spending and bellicose postures.⁸⁹

Ultimately, despite the many deeply worrying developments which face us, what is required now is courage, an understanding that progressive change is possible, and that a darker, dystopian future is not inevitable. We therefore hope that the many positive, thoughtful and imaginative contributions provided by respondents to this report help to inspire and sustain the reader in their future endeavours towards peace and disarmament, whatever they may be.

“In the current challenging context, it might seem counterintuitive to even raise the issue of nuclear disarmament. But already the Doomsday Clock is at its closest point to midnight for 50 years. Quite simply, if we don't start in earnest a debate about how to get back on a path towards nuclear disarmament it may be too late. It is also the case that for too long any debate about nuclear weapons has been binary—too polarised. For or against. Multilateral vs unilateral. In the words of Lord Des Browne this is “very stale”. Those who are concerned about where the world is heading—whether from a cautious or critical position—have largely been absent from what little political, public and media debate there is. This should and must change.”

Steve Barwick (Nuclear Education Trust, Chair)



APPENDIX

Methodology

This section outlines our research methods and explains how the data our report is based upon was gathered, analysed, and presented. The primary research conducted for this report involved a survey of the views of parliamentarians, academics, civil society representatives, and other experts. As outlined in the Introduction, the six survey questions we posed to interviewees cover several areas relating to UK defence, security, and international policy, with a focus on nuclear arms control and disarmament.

Who was interviewed for this report and why?

Before sending out interview invitations, we identified knowledgeable and experienced practitioners in relevant disciplines and professions whose opinions would be of interest to both subject specialists and the general reader. Interviews were thus sent to several types of people with a professional interest, knowledge of, or expertise in security, defence and international politics, with a particular focus on nuclear weapons. As a result, the report includes a range of voices representing the current debate on these matters, with a UK focus.

Invitations to participate in this project were sent to parliamentarians, academics, civil society representatives, and other defence and security experts—representing many different backgrounds and opinions on these issues. In total, around 200 interview invitations were sent. We received 42 responses over a period of six months between August 2023 and January 2024. Of those who participated in our survey, 12 are political figures or parliamentarians (including at least one person from each of the main UK political parties: Conservatives, Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, Scottish National Party); 8 are academics, researchers or policy experts; 20 are NGO representatives; and 2 are from other professions e.g. the civil service. 30 respondents contributed to the survey by providing a written survey. 12 participated in the survey via an online or in-person interview.

How were the interview questions chosen?

The questions in our survey are based on a recommendation from the UK Government's 2023 Refresh (IR2023) of its 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR2021). One question (Q5) draws on the IR2021 itself. The questions were intended to create a considered and well-informed discussion, and encourage the articulation of a range of views. Each question starts by inviting participants to engage with the policy area highlighted by indicating whether they 'agree or disagree' with the approach outlined in IR2021/IR2023. A couple of supplementary questions were then suggested to encourage wider discussion on the issues raised. Respondents were asked to limit their answers to 250 words maximum for each question. Each of the six questions we asked respondents has been reproduced at the start of the relevant chapter.

How were the interviews conducted?

Thirty of the interview responses we received were in written form. Twelve interviews were conducted in person or online over Zoom. All interviewees were sent consent forms which gave them the option of having their responses anonymised. Ten interviewees asked for their responses to be anonymised. One of these ten interviewees asked for their responses only to be used as background information, which means we have not reproduced any of their data in the report. Quotes used in this report were sent for prior approval to certain interviewees on request. The interviews were conducted by the author of the report and the Chair of NET.

What is the scope of the report?

The analysis contained in Chapters 1 to 6 is primarily based on the data provided by interviewees in their responses to our questions. As noted above, we began our survey in August 2023. The Hamas-led attack on Israel that took place on Octo-

ber 7 thus occurred in the middle of our interview process. As a result, some interviewees refer to the ensuing Israel-Gaza war in their responses, and we have included several of these comments in the discussion. However, because not all respondents had the opportunity to comment on these events, we have not provided recommendations concerning the Israel-Gaza war in the report.

Overall, we are confident that the interviewee responses cover significant ground and are sufficiently representative of the main views and arguments concerning the UK's defence, diplomacy and disarmament policy found within prominent discussions and the wider literature. We are therefore convinced that, given the range of people who agreed to participate in our survey, the report provides a valuable and up-to-date snapshot of opinion on these matters held by informed and expert analysts and commentators.

How was the interview data analysed?

The interviewee data gathered has primarily been organised and summarised in each chapter using a qualitative analysis. This firstly meant reading each set of answers and grouping them according to whether the arguments and positions provided by respondents generally: i) agreed ii) disagreed iii) presented mixed views on the statement from the IR2021 or IR2023 provided in each question. Each chapter begins with a selection of quotes representing each of these three types of responses to each question. The main body of each chapter then develops the discussion by including a summary of the main themes and issues raised by respondents when considering each question. These are presented by grouping respondents according to the type of response they provided to the survey, for example, whether their answers were more supportive, or more critical, of UK government policy.

In addition to the most frequently made arguments or positions being included, individual ideas and proposals are highlighted where they are particularly original, well expressed, or demonstrate specialist knowledge. It is important to note that some respondent's answers included in the report have

been lightly edited for clarity and to remove grammatical or spelling errors.

What significant trends or biases were found in the interviewee dataset?

The respondents to our survey can be broadly categorised according to their existing positions on political issues and their worldviews. A key dividing line we identified is whether a respondent is generally supportive of the UK possessing nuclear weapons or generally opposes UK nuclear possession. We determined this both from respondents' professional outputs and roles, and their answers to our survey. Being clear about who we interviewed—and their political positions and opinions—is important so that the reader can appreciate the spread of views captured by the survey. In addition, whilst some quantitative analysis is used in the report, this is done sparingly and with an awareness that the responses are tilted towards those who generally oppose UK nuclear possession.

For example, of the 42 people interviewed for our survey:

One third generally support UK nuclear possession

Two thirds generally oppose UK nuclear possession.

This is significant as it means that the interview responses are tilted towards those who oppose nuclear possession, and thus tend to exhibit more critical opinions of and on UK government policy. In order to provide a representative range of views (rather than balance), and include these views fairly in the discussion, we have included at least one full quote from each interviewee in the opening quotes section of each chapter. In addition, we have endeavoured to include all of the main arguments and ideas expressed by each side of the debate in the discussion.

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