



Nuclear Education Trust's Submission to the UK Strategic Defence Review 2024-2025

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1. Describe the strategic, threat, and operational context for UK Defence 2024-2050

This submission is based on the Nuclear Education Trust's May 2024 report *The Future for UK Defence, Diplomacy and Disarmament – 50 Proposals for a More Peaceful World*. The report was informed by more than forty responses to a survey of opinion formers, including former UK Defence and Foreign Secretaries, think tank experts, academics and representatives of all political parties. The report sought informed views on six key international policy issues discussed in the UK Government's 2023 Integrated Review Refresh (IR2023). The report is available here:

<https://nucleareducationtrust.org/the-future-for-uk-defence-diplomacy-and-disarmament-50-proposals-for-a-more-peaceful-world/>

Great power war, rising nuclear risks

The Russia-Ukraine conflict continues to be a subject of deep concern as it enters its third year. Fears persist regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons by Russia, and the widening of the conflict, with no end currently in sight, and no signs of any determined effort towards a negotiated peace settlement. A new Cold War involving Russia, China and NATO looms on the horizon. 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.

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. 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 the UK—which could lead to nuclear war if the taboo on nuclear use continues to erode.

Twin existential threats

Climate change and nuclear war have been described as 'twin existential threats' facing humanity. 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." The depth and immediacy of the unfolding environmental crisis means it is important to consider the impact it will have on nuclear weapons infrastructure and the strategic calculations of nuclear possessors. In addition, most uses of nuclear warheads would likely have severe or catastrophic long-term environmental consequences. Experts have asked whether human civilisation will survive the 21st century given such threats, including those posed by pandemics and artificial intelligence.

Implications for UK defence

The UK's military reach was generally seen by respondents to our report as having clear limits, despite the powerful capabilities the UK retains. Nuclear modernisation efforts are increasingly costly and difficult for NWS—including the UK—which may act as a brake on the speed with which these systems can be deployed. For the UK, which also has limits to its economic, human, and technological resources, this poses a challenge. It also presents an opportunity for encouraging dialogue on arms control and disarmament regimes. The UK should not focus solely on coercive and military responses to conflicts, nor lose sight of the need to restart moves towards detente and disarmament.

2. Propose, in order of priority, the roles UK Defence must be capable of fulfilling 2024-2040

In terms of the UK's global role and responsibilities, one area of fairly broad agreement amongst respondents to our report was that IR2023 overestimates the UK's ability to influence world events and that the UK should largely focus on security issues closer to home.

Prioritising human security

Those we spoke to who favour the UK moving to a more modest defence posture—focused on the Euro-Atlantic area—generally want the UK to divert resources from military spending to civil goods and services, and increase spending on addressing the climate emergency. In addition, several interviewees argued for the UK to help create a truly multipolar world order based on international law, diplomacy, a strengthened UN and the principles of inclusion, social justice, and democracy. Rather than pursuing business as usual and prioritising the use of military tools and force to retain influence and control, the UK should prioritise diplomacy and multilateralism, in addition to reducing and regulating arms transfers—especially to repressive states.

These ideas, prioritising global cooperation and environmental protection, correspond with the concept of human security. As noted in UN General Assembly resolution 66/290, “human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.” It calls for “people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people.”

<https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/N1147622.pdf>

A new approach to the UK's international policy

Several respondents to our report, 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 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 to realise this include: increasing the aid budget; closing tax havens; providing financial support to the states worst affected by the climate crisis; making reparations for the UK's colonial past.

Development, diplomacy and conflict prevention

Our report also recommends that the UK should:

- Recommit to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and mobilise resources to improve its performance against SDG targets.
- Commit more resources to diplomacy, including to boost the UK's relationships with EU member states and UN conflict prevention and resolution initiatives.
- 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; reparations to communities affected by nuclear testing and related harms.
- Build on the UN Secretary General's 2023 Agenda for Peace and the 2023 Artificial Intelligence summit in London, by convening states to discuss regulating emerging technology, including a legal instrument to ensure meaningful human control over weapons systems when using force.

3. Propose in order of priority what defence capability (as a function, not defined as equipment or organisation) UK Defence requires to deliver the roles required of it 2024-2050. This should distinguish between:

- **The capability required for enduring, standing commitments and tasks, or to be held at high readiness.**
- **The capability required on mobilisation in times of crisis.**

In order to prioritise human security, the UK should develop appropriate capabilities. The UN Trust Fund for Human Security has explained what this means in practice, noting that "Prevention is the core objective of human security. It addresses the root causes of vulnerabilities, focuses attention on emerging risks and emphasizes early action. It strengthens local capacities to build resilience, and promotes solutions that enhance social cohesion and advance respect for human rights and dignity."

<https://www.un.org/humansecurity/what-is-human-security/#:~:text=is%20left%20behind,-,Prevention%20and%20resilience,risks%20and%20emphasizes%20early%20action>

Addressing the climate crisis

Our report found that 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. Notably, the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) 2022 Defence Capability Framework includes the "Mitigation of and adaptation to the effects of Climate Change" as a "guiding capability principle". To help address the challenges posed by the climate crisis, the UK should invest resources in societal resilience, focusing on territorial defence and green technology to decarbonise the economy.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62d7d1668fa8f50c0a8a4029/MOD_Defence_Capability_Framework_Accessible_Jul22.pdf

The UK government should also identify what essential assets/personnel are required to realise human security needs, and what current and planned military equipment and weapons projects are unsustainable or unnecessary. UK defence structures and requirements thus 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.

Reshaping defence spending

Guiding Capability Principle 7 of the MOD's Defence Capability Framework is "Maintaining a balanced and affordable Defence Programme". However, in March 2024 the Public Accounts Committee found that the MOD "has not credibly demonstrated how it will manage its funding to deliver the military capabilities the Government wants."

<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/127/public-accounts-committee/news/200289/uk-defence-no-credible-government-plan-to-deliver-desired-military-capabilities/>

Given the MOD's significant budget problems, the government should lead a public conversation on the relative costs and risks of increasing military spending beyond 2% of GDP, including discussion on other areas of public spending which would have to be sacrificed to meet this goal, with a particular focus on projected rises to the nuclear weapons budget over the next decade, and options for reducing this.

Our report provides several other ideas on how to reshape the UK's defence spending. For example, a common argument from respondents 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 sent to Ukraine, which have drained UK munitions stocks. In addition, to produce a more realistic defence budget, the UK could drastically scale down or cancel big-ticket defence projects (SSBNs/SSNs/a third aircraft carrier/F-35/Tempest FCAS).

4. Describe how existing UK Defence capability and the current 10-year programme match the demands of the roles and capabilities identified for 2024-2040, highlighting and prioritising critical gaps.

Identify areas that require urgent attention to ameliorate immediate strategic level risks or vulnerabilities, including in logistic support and medical capability.

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.

Nuclear risk reduction, arms control and disarmament

Our report found that the UK Government should promote strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction measures, both at meetings of the NWS and in other international fora. The UK should also outline what progressive steps on nuclear arms control and disarmament it will take to revive the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), 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.

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 a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty can eventually enter-into-force, including by finding an appropriate venue for negotiations. The UK should, additionally, participate in discussions concerning the establishment of a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East.

UK nuclear possession and modernisation

Several respondents to our report highlighted how UK nuclear weapons modernisation undermines its NPT disarmament obligations, and proposed that the UK needs to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in its security policy. For example, 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) to help renew the NPT and develop a more democratic security policy. Reductions in transparency over military matters which the MOD has implemented as a result of previous security reviews have not enhanced security in any meaningful way and have allowed critics and hostile nations to claim, with justification, that the UK's approach to information disclosure is no different to that of its adversaries. Furthermore, 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 commence a diplomatic push for all NWS to commit to a No First Use nuclear weapons policy.

A number of report respondents argued that the UK should join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and outline a timetable for eliminating its nuclear weapons. In the near term, the UK could 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.

21. Propose how to improve financial management and administration across Defence, meeting HMG standards of accountability and identifying how more rapid adoption of digital technology will modernise culture, organisation and ways of working.

The Ministry of Defence should engage in a more open and transparent relationship with the public, and should aim to engage citizens on security matters which are of genuine concern to them. For example, the MOD should assist parliamentary actors who wish 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 supported by the government, focused on providing meaningful scrutiny.

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

We do not consider this consultation for the Strategic Defence Review to have been conducted to appropriate standards of public engagement, nor do we consider the government to be engaging in good faith with consultees. We have no doubt that opinions which do not reflect the views of the review team will be discarded and ignored. It is therefore reasonable to question the legitimacy of the existing review process. We recommend that future UK international policy reviews are designed to be more democratic, transparent, and accountable from the start, including by opening them up to greater consultation and input from the public, civil society groups, and academics.

22. Propose how UK Defence can build relationships with allies, partners and alliances as a strategic strength for the UK

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 should 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.

China and Russia

There was general agreement amongst survey respondents concerning the ambition expressed in IR2023 that the UK should seek to improve relations with Russia and China when possible. 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.

For several 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 President 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.

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. In addition, short term-measures to stabilise great power relations include improving crisis diplomacy and conflict prevention mechanisms.

On AUKUS

A number of respondents were sceptical about the need for, and merits of, the AUKUS deal. There is thus a case for the UK Government reviewing AUKUS, and considering all its options. The UK Government should also 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. The project costs should continually be scrutinised to avoid overspending and minimise costs and risks for Australia. China should be engaged in discussions over its security concerns regarding the deal.

Reassessing other key relationships

Our report recommends that the UK should establish a more cautious and critical relationship with countries with particularly poor human rights records (notably Israel and Saudi Arabia). The UK should also 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.

Principal Author, Dr Tim Street, October 2024