

**SPOKESPERSONS' PAPER**

# **The UK's Nuclear Deterrent**

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Liberal   
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## February 2023 update - Richard Foord MP

As the new Liberal Democrat defence spokesperson, I wanted to review and update the party spokesperson's paper originally due for consideration at Autumn Conference 2022. I would like to thank Jamie Stone MP, my predecessor, for his excellent work on the last version of this paper.

Clearly, in the six months since the paper was first published, much has changed in UK domestic politics - and also worldwide. Ukraine has now liberated swathes of its territory; over half of all the land taken by the Russians in February 2022 is under Ukrainian control once more. Some things, however, remain similar. At the time of writing, we still face warnings of the potential of a new front in the north of the country; of Russia capturing towns such as Soledar; and Putin's veiled threats of the use of nuclear weapons. Indeed, such alarming threats have continued these past few months.

It was in September, following the partial mobilisation in Russia, that Putin memorably said, "[t]his is not a bluff", as he alluded to the potential use of nuclear weapons in defence of Russian territory, territory which according to the Russians now includes the four illegal annexed Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia. As Ukrainian successes have occurred, questions were raised about whether Putin could resort to nuclear weapons, if he was to feel he faced an existential defeat. The New START nuclear arms control treaty between the US and Russia has frayed, with Russia suspending its participation. Reports in the media suggest that senior Russian military figures have discussed the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

And looking beyond the scope of the Russia-Ukraine war, 2022 did not give huge cause for optimism in relation to the geopolitical context, nor for disarmament initiatives. The 2022 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty ended without agreement on a substantive text, thanks in part to Russian opposition. We were left with a very real indicator of the potential for future conflict in the South China Sea, when China conducted military exercises in the Taiwan Strait which crossed the median line, following Nancy Pelosi's visit. Focus on Iran has also been renewed in response to the dreadful repression by the authorities there - a repressive reaction to brave Iranian women protesting following the murder of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 - and the lack of progress in relation to the JCPOA. Then there is the concerning manner in which Russia and Iran are now cooperating - Iran supplying drones in return for what has been described, one suspects euphemistically, as 'advanced military components'.

In this updated paper, I have made a similar assessment of the geopolitical environment to that made last summer. Much as we would like to take steps down the nuclear ladder

- something which I have always believed in, including during my service in the armed forces - we must be realistic about the situation we find ourselves in. It would not best progress our long-standing aim, as a party, of a world without nuclear weapons, because it would not be reciprocated.

In the current environment, moving down the nuclear ladder would send entirely the wrong message - not just to Vladimir Putin and those around him, who might conclude that their threats were successful, but also to our allies. We must not let our commitment to the defence of our NATO allies come into question, nor our support for Ukraine. But it is right that in the future we continue to examine a move down from continuous at-sea deterrence, so that when the geopolitical context improves, the UK has an opportunity to demonstrate the leadership on disarmament which is sorely lacking among nuclear weapon states.

Debates in the party about the UK's nuclear deterrent have tended to focus on nuclear weapons capability. There is another area of policy that we have tended to neglect; that of declaratory policy. Declaratory policy articulates when the government thinks it could be prudent, effective, or justifiable to use nuclear weapons. This paper proposes that the UK should adopt a 'No First Use' declaratory policy, in close consultation with our NATO allies.

As a liberal, I am hopeful that with cooperation and communication, that will become a reality. Amidst these turbulent times, the Liberal Democrats will continue to advocate for the UK to maximise opportunities for disarmament initiatives when they arise.

Richard Foord MP  
February 2023

## **Introduction - Liberal Democrats and the UK's nuclear deterrent**

As Liberal Democrats, it is universal liberal principles which are at the core of what we believe: not least among them internationalism, human rights, the pursuit of peace, and the rule of law.

That is why we continue to champion the liberal, rules-based international order, which provides a strong basis for multilateral cooperation to address the world's biggest problems.

Those principles form the basis of two of our key beliefs: first, that the Government of the United Kingdom has a duty to keep the people of this country safe. Second, our long-held desire to negotiate towards a world where nuclear weapons are put beyond use.

As a result, we have always been clear about the legal, moral and historical obligations upon the UK to pursue global nuclear disarmament, which would make the world and the UK a safer place. It is why we have led calls for the UK Government to do more when it has shied away from taking action on global nuclear disarmament, and condemned the Government when it has breached those obligations.

It is why, when in Government, Liberal Democrats secured a commitment to reduce the stockpile of UK nuclear weapons to no more than 180 warheads by the middle of the 2020s. It is why we championed the Trident Alternatives Review, which considered not just the renewal of Trident, but the very question of whether the UK should continue to possess a nuclear deterrent at all - in itself a significant step for a nuclear weapon state to consider. It is why we condemned the Conservative Government's 2021 decision to increase the stockpile of nuclear weapons.

These same beliefs are the foundation of our most recent policy on nuclear weapons, set out in Policy Paper 127, *Towards a World Free of Nuclear Weapons*, adopted by conference in 2017, which recommended a change in the UK's nuclear posture - from one where a submarine is patrolling in the sea at all times (known as Continuous At Sea Deterrent, or CASD), to a medium-responsiveness posture, that provides minimum deterrence by maintaining armed patrols with no continuous deployment.

But keeping our country safe must be the first priority of any government. To that end, Liberal Democrats have never advocated that the UK should unilaterally dispose of its nuclear weapons.

In an insecure global environment, unilateral disarmament would represent a failure to fulfil that fundamental duty of the UK: keeping its people safe.

But neither would such a step achieve the crucial aim of global, multilateral disarmament. It would be irresponsible to do so without ensuring that other nuclear weapon states do the same.

Now, in the most delicate security situation since the Cold War, sadly the UK finds itself in a deeply unstable and insecure world. The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly increased the risk of nuclear conflict.

Liberal Democrats have a proud tradition of being the most forward-thinking UK party on disarmament. We have shown how a nuclear weapons state can credibly move away from Continuous At Sea Deterrent (CASD) as a step towards further disarmament. But we have also maintained that flexibility is crucial - indeed, our proposals always included the possibility that changes in the strategic environment might require steps up, as well as down, the nuclear ladder.

Given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, and its far-reaching consequences for European security, we do not believe it would be sensible for the UK Government to take further steps down the nuclear ladder.

Vladimir Putin's Russia poses a clear threat to our national security and that of our NATO allies. While NATO has no wish to see the current conflict in Ukraine escalate to the nuclear level, Russia has made veiled threats as to its readiness to use nuclear weapons, on the battlefield or elsewhere. In these circumstances, NATO must retain all the necessary elements of a credible nuclear deterrent. The UK's nuclear weapons are assigned to the protection of the UK's NATO allies, and play an important role in NATO's nuclear posture.

Abandoning the current posture of continuous deployment at this time would send the wrong signal to Vladimir Putin and weaken the credibility of the UK's nuclear deterrent. It would inevitably cast doubt on the UK's commitment to the defence of our NATO allies.

Furthermore, taking a step down the nuclear ladder at a moment when it is so unlikely to be reciprocated will sadly do nothing to further our ambition of global disarmament. We must acknowledge that the security environment sets a crucial context for the likelihood of progress in international disarmament negotiations.

That is why we believe that our plan to move down from CASD should remain a credible option for UK leadership on nuclear disarmament when the strategic environment is more conducive to progress.

However, the challenging security environment, and escalating nuclear risks in Europe and around the world do not mean that the UK should abandon the nuclear disarmament agenda. Indeed, it should embolden the UK to make a renewed push. While we are realistic about the chances of significant success in the current context, it is vital that opportunities which arise as the global security environment changes are not squandered.

There is much that the UK Government can do in the meantime to pursue disarmament. Scrapping plans to lift the cap on the stockpile of nuclear weapons must be an immediate step, but that should by no means be considered sufficient. Global disarmament should become a diplomatic priority for the Foreign Office, accompanied by meaningful engagement with non-nuclear weapon states on disarmament initiatives, such as the Stockholm Initiative. While disarmament developments with Russia are unlikely, the UK Government should explore opportunities with other nuclear weapon states, including those which have not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

### **Summary of recommendations**

This spokesperson's paper first sets out security challenges for the UK involving nuclear weapon states and nuclear risk. In Section 2, the paper sets out the current position of the UK Government, and details the ongoing construction of the Trident replacement Dreadnought-class submarines.

The following section discusses whether the security challenges (outlined in Section 1) necessitate the UK's retention of credible, minimum nuclear deterrent. We conclude that they do - and that a change in nuclear posture at this time would not be credible. In Section 4, the paper sets out ways in which the UK Government can pursue the broader disarmament agenda amidst a challenging strategic environment.

*The paper makes the following recommendations:*

- Parliament should establish a joint annual review into the progress of acquisition of the Dreadnought-class submarines, to be carried out by the Public Accounts Committee and the Defence Committee.
- The UK Government should also increase the frequency of Ministerial updates regarding the acquisition to a biannual basis.
- The UK Government should provide scrutinising opportunities to Parliament regarding the development of the UK's replacement warhead.
- The UK Government should maintain a minimum, credible nuclear deterrent.
- The UK Government should maintain the current posture of Continuous At-Sea Deterrent.
- Moving down from CASD should remain a credible option for the UK Government to demonstrate leadership on nuclear disarmament, at a time when the strategic environment is more conducive to progress.

The UK Government should pursue global disarmament, and accordingly:

- Reverse plans to increase the cap on the stockpile of nuclear weapons; and associated reductions in transparency commitments.
- Publicly recommit to the UK's obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.
- Recommit to verification work - including by making available increased financial resources for such vital research.
- Reduce nuclear risk by establishing a 'No First Use' policy for its nuclear weapons.
- Making the pursuit of global nuclear disarmament a diplomatic priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.
- Look to engage more deeply with non-nuclear weapon states on disarmament initiatives.



- Aim to bring other nuclear weapon states into a more constructive relationship with the Stockholm Initiative.
- Engage with the proponents of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, while acknowledging it cannot sign the Treaty.
- Make clear to the US Administration that New START should be maintained, with Russian participation resumed, if at all possible, throughout the current conflict.
- Rule out development of battlefield (“tactical”) nuclear weapons.
- Use the P5 process to discuss arms control measures regarding battlefield nuclear weapons.
- Given the unlikelihood of disarmament developments with Russia, explore opportunities to pursue disarmament initiatives with other nuclear weapon states, including:
  - Engaging with other nuclear weapon states regarding bilateral adoption of transparency measures.
  - Continue engagement with nuclear weapon states which are yet to sign the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, which Russia has already signed.
  - Continue to encourage remaining countries which have not ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty, which Russia has already ratified, to do so.

# 1 Increasing instability

1.0.1 The global order is characterised by increasing instability, which presents new security challenges for the UK. Many factors are at play, but unfortunately the risk from nuclear weapons has risen up the agenda. This section discusses the nature of the challenges we face - allowing us, in the following sections, to assess whether they necessitate the retention of the UK's minimum nuclear deterrent.

1.0.2 First, this section outlines the security challenges posed by some of the nuclear weapons states - Russia, China and North Korea - as well as Iran, which does not currently possess nuclear weapons but seeks to acquire them. It then discusses how rising global instability has increased the risk of nuclear weapons being used.

## 1.1 Russia

*"The prospect of nuclear conflict, once unthinkable, is now back within the realm of possibility"* - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, March 2022

1.1.1 The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked not just an upending of the security order in Europe but also peace and security across the world. This represents a hugely dangerous moment. Liberal Democrats stand with the people of Ukraine in the face of this brutal and illegal invasion.

1.1.2 For the first time since the Cold War, a nuclear weapon state, Russia, has threatened the use of such weapons in conflict. Ukraine is, rightly, being supported in the conflict by arms and intelligence from NATO countries, including the UK. It has been over 20 years since nuclear weapon states (India and Pakistan in 1999) were so close to being in open combat with each other.

1.1.3 The potential danger of nuclear weapons, and the associated risk of accidental use via misunderstanding, misjudgment or other human error, has been thrown into sharp relief during the invasion. In March 2022, three quarters of the British public were concerned about the prospect of a nuclear attack from Russia - with a third fearing such an attack was likely<sup>1</sup>.

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<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/03/02/how-worried-are-britons-about-prospect-nuclear-att>

## *Russian nuclear threats*

1.1.4 Vladimir Putin's threats regarding the use of nuclear weapons have been brazen. There have been two sorts of threat:

### *I. Threats of strategic use of nuclear weapons against NATO countries*

1.1.5 On the day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Putin threatened that, "No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history", widely taken to be a veiled threat of the use of nuclear weapons against the West<sup>2</sup>.

1.1.6 Days later, Putin subsequently moved Russian nuclear forces "to a special regime of combat duty" - citing "leaders of major NATO countries...making aggressive statements about our country"<sup>3</sup>. In an interview with CNN, Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov did not rule out the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons.

1.1.7 Such veiled threats persisted into late 2022. Notably in September 2022, as he launched the partial mobilisation of Russian troops, Putin stated that, "If the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, to defend Russia and our people, we will use all means we have. This is not a bluff. The territorial integrity of our motherland, our independence and freedom will be secured, I repeat with all the means we have."

1.1.8 In early December 2022, Putin issued more veiled threats, claiming that the threat of a nuclear war was "growing" - although he also asserted that Russia had not "gone mad"<sup>4</sup>.

1.1.9 The Kremlin has made tests and deployment plans for new nuclear equipment a prominent part of propaganda regarding the war. One such example came in April 2022, when the Russian military tested its new Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missiles<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/29/would-russia-really-launch-nuclear-weapons>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60547473>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63893316>

<sup>5</sup>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-deploy-first-nuclear-capable-sarmat-missiles-tass-2022-04-23/>

1.1.10 Simulations of nuclear strikes on NATO countries, including the UK, have been depicted on Russian state TV. Such broadcasts have also included predictions of a nuclear war as 'more probable' than Russia losing in Ukraine.

1.1.11 Over the course of 2022, opposition within the international community to the potential use of nuclear weapons by Russia in Ukraine has grown. The language regarding nuclear weapons and the invasion of Ukraine - including that "[t]he use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible" - in the G20 summit statement was perceived as a diplomatic success by the West, given the previous reluctance of countries like China to offer judgement on the war<sup>6</sup>.

## *II. Threats of tactical use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine*

1.1.12 Lower yield so-called 'tactical' nuclear weapons (as opposed to 'strategic' nuclear weapons, which are launched over longer distances) are primarily designed to provide for battlefield advantage as opposed to having a deterrence purpose. Such weapons generally have a lower yield and thus are less powerful than their 'strategic' equivalent.

1.1.13 Concerns regarding the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine grew in autumn 2022. Russian claims that Ukraine intended on using a 'dirty bomb' raised fears that this might serve as the pretext for a Russian false flag attack, potentially one involving the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station, the largest of its kind in Europe, has also been perceived to be a vulnerable site for a potential false flag attack. Reports suggested that senior members of the Russian military had discussed the potential use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, in October 2022<sup>7</sup>. In December 2022, Putin visited Belarus and discussed training crews for Belarusian aircraft, which have been modified - in cooperation with Russia - so that they can carry tactical nuclear warheads<sup>8</sup>.

1.1.14 There is ongoing debate as to whether Russia would ever use such weapons - uncertainty which in itself contributes to nuclear risk. Undoubtedly, the use of a tactical nuclear weapon by Russia in Ukraine would represent a very dangerous moment for global security.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/4a3197fd-cd9d-4517-9ac2-bce69dce5e0b>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63488547>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-64030975>

## *The West's response*

1.1.15 Russia's nuclear posturing has proven a significant challenge for policymakers in the UK and other allied countries as they have sought to maximise their response to the invasion of Ukraine, without resulting in a military response from Russia that could potentially escalate to a nuclear exchange.

1.1.16 The refusal of NATO to impose a 'no-fly zone' over Ukraine in March 2022, following a request from President Zelensky, was one high profile example. Similar justifications were also presented regarding discussions over whether to transfer MiG-29 aircraft from Poland to Ukraine.

1.1.17 Diplomats and officials are having to re-learn the skills of the Cold War. That includes understanding threats regarding nuclear escalation as an "attempt to use nuclear weapons as a tool of coercive bargaining"<sup>9</sup>.

## *The war in Ukraine: prospects for nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation*

1.1.18 The Russian objective of seizing Kyiv shortly after their invasion of Ukraine failed emphatically. Ukraine has since liberated significant portions of its territory - around 54% of the territory taken by Russia in February. There has been speculation regarding the potential nuclear measures which Russia might resort to, if the Kremlin believed they faced an existential threat via defeat in Ukraine.

1.1.19 The Russia-Ukraine conflict has also stalled nuclear arms control and transparency initiatives, and is causing some to fray. While the New START treaty (discussed in 4.6.1) has remained intact, talks in late 2022 regarding resuming mutual inspections, which were halted following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, were postponed by Russia<sup>10</sup>. In February 2023, Russia suspended its participation in the treaty. Russia also prevented the agreement of a substantive text at the Review Conference for the Non-Proliferation Treaty, held in August 2022 (see 4.1.6). These negative developments come on top of years of deteriorating bilateral arms control measures between the US and Russia preceding the invasion, most notably in 2019, when the Trump administration withdrew the US from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty following treaty violations by Russia.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://twitter.com/IanKearns\\_/status/1514707411474522119?s=20&t=f5Jxc8TtUL7oYbq9kX6ftg](https://twitter.com/IanKearns_/status/1514707411474522119?s=20&t=f5Jxc8TtUL7oYbq9kX6ftg)

<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unilaterally-postpones-nuclear-arms-meeting-with-us-kommersant-2022-11-28/>

1.1.20 We are also concerned that the invasion of Ukraine might pose challenges for non-proliferation. Ukraine was previously provided with security assurances in the Budapest Memorandum, including by Russia, upon its accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The way in which these security assurances have been disregarded by Russia could deter nuclear weapon states from disarming in the future. It is also possible that this conflict could increase the risk of non-nuclear weapon states deciding to acquire nuclear weapons in the future.

#### *Russia and its nuclear arsenal*

1.1.21 Russia's nuclear threats in Ukraine fit into the context of an ongoing period of modernisation of its nuclear arsenal. The Russian nuclear arsenal currently stands at just under 6,000 warheads (of which around 1500 are usable)<sup>11</sup>. This stands significantly below its Cold War peak of around 40,000 warheads but is still the largest stockpile of any country in the world<sup>12</sup>.

1.1.22 Modernised equipment - a programme which has been running for decades - now accounts for 89% of Russia's nuclear weapons and equipment<sup>13</sup>. That has included the development of low-yield 'tactical' nuclear weapons as well as new delivery systems such as hyper-sonic missiles.

#### *Russia and threats to security*

1.1.23 In the years running up to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's stance as a security actor was one characterised by aggression and assertiveness. This has only increased following the invasion. Russia has made veiled threats regarding the use of nuclear weapons, including against the UK and its NATO allies. We believe that Russia poses a direct challenge to the security of both the UK and our allies.

## **1.2 China**

1.2.1 The rise of China undoubtedly represents a significant shift in international relations - marking a decisive end to the unipolar era. By the end of the decade, China may already be the world's largest economy, after more than a century of American dominance.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60564123>

<sup>12</sup> <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00963402.2022.2038907?needAccess=true>

1.2.2 While China's hard power does not currently challenge the US's military assets, defence spending has increased year on year for the last two decades (current estimates suggest China will spend over \$250 billion in 2022)<sup>14</sup>. China is a nuclear power and currently has around 200 deliverable warheads. The Pentagon's latest assessment is that China plans to increase the size of its nuclear arsenal to as many as 700 nuclear warheads by 2027 - and potentially over 1,000 warheads by 2030<sup>15</sup>.

1.2.3 Over the course of the last decade, China's relations with the West, including the UK, have deteriorated - over a range of issues including:

- Breaches of international law in the South China Sea;
- The crackdown on civil liberties and erosion of democracy in Hong Kong;
- China's wolf warrior diplomacy and behaviour towards countries such as Lithuania;
- The CCP's domestic human rights record and treatment of minority groups within China, including the persecution of the Uyghurs, which amounts to the crime of genocide<sup>16</sup>.

1.2.4 Unlike Russia, China is not identified by the UK Government as a current or active threat to UK security. Instead, it is described as a 'systemic competitor' in the Integrated Review<sup>17</sup>, with the possibility of "an increasing risk to UK interests" in the future.

1.2.5 China does not currently represent a direct threat of an either conventional or nuclear nature to the United Kingdom's national security. However, we are concerned about the potential for this to change in the future.

1.2.6 Taiwan represents the greatest potential flashpoint for future conflict in the Indo-Pacific, and has been the subject of rising tensions. In October 2021, Xi Jinping commented that "reunification" with Taiwan "must be fulfilled"<sup>18</sup>. The US has maintained a policy of ambiguity regarding whether they would defend Taiwan in the eventuality of an invasion. In May 2022, President Biden declared that the US would come to Taiwan's

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<sup>14</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?locations=CN>

<sup>15</sup> <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>

<sup>16</sup>

<https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Uyghur-Tribunal-Summary-Judgment-9th-Dec-21.pdf>

<sup>17</sup>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-58854081>

defence - but also claimed that US policy on the matter had not changed<sup>19</sup>. Whether Russian military failures and the solidarity of Western countries in response to the invasion of Ukraine will have any deterrent effect upon a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is unclear.

1.2.7 The volatility regarding the South China Sea was demonstrated last year following the visit of US Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022. China undertook its largest ever drills around the island, with several vessels and aircraft crossing the median line between China and Taiwan, actions condemned by Taiwan's foreign minister Joseph Wu as "highly provocative"<sup>20</sup>.

1.2.8 The UK Government does not have treaty obligations to come to Taiwan's defence in such a scenario. It is unclear what the UK's response would be in the event of an attempted invasion by China, but it seems plausible that the UK might provide defensive weaponry to Taiwan. In the light of the invasion of Ukraine, it is possible that the UK Government decides to take such a step regardless of an invasion.

1.2.9 Any military conflict between China and other nuclear weapon states in the Indo-Pacific, for example in the context of an attempted invasion of Taiwan, would result in heightened nuclear risk.

### **1.3 North Korea**

1.3.1 North Korea continues to expand its arsenal of nuclear weapons and test delivery mechanisms, including inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). According to analysts, North Korea "could have more than sixty nuclear weapons"<sup>21</sup>.

1.3.2 While President Trump's two summits with Kim Jong-un received significant media attention, they did not result in any lasting breakthrough in regards to denuclearisation. In 2021, the North Korean regime recommenced production of fissile material (having previously stopped production in 2018).

1.3.3 In 2022, North Korea carried out missile test launches more frequently than in previous years. There are warnings of a potential nuclear test - which, if carried out, would represent the first since 2017.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-61548531>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-62416363>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/background/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-missile-tests-military-capabilities>



1.3.4 We do not believe that the North Korean nuclear weapons programme currently constitutes a direct threat to the UK's national security. However, we remain concerned about the proliferation of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

## **1.4 Iran**

1.4.1 The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a significant milestone for non-proliferation, agreed in 2015. The UK is a party to the JCPOA. Under the terms of the JCPOA, Iran agreed not to produce highly enriched uranium or plutonium (which is necessary to produce the fissile material used in nuclear weapons).

1.4.2 President Trump pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018. Subsequently, the Iranian government restarted the process of enriching uranium<sup>22</sup>. Following the election of President Biden, the US announced its intention to return to the JCPOA. The Iranian elections in 2021 saw the moderate President Rouhani, who was at the end of his term, replaced by hardline Ebrahim Raisi.

1.4.3 At the time of writing, negotiations on a renewed JCPOA are underway in Vienna - although whether a deal will be reached is currently unclear, and has been complicated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent military cooperation between the two countries, which includes Russia transferring advanced military components to Iran in return for Iranian drones. It is also yet to be seen whether the 2022 protests in Iran, sparked by the murder of Mahsa Amini by the Iranian authorities, and subsequent repression of protesters, will have an impact on the willingness of parties to the JCPOA to engage in negotiations.

1.4.4 Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon would represent a failure of non-proliferation. Iran would become only the second country to acquire nuclear weapons this century. The potential for further destabilisation of the Middle East (and proliferation of nuclear weapons within the region) is significant and highly concerning.

1.4.5 At present, however, the challenge to the UK's security posed by Iran does not constitute a direct threat to national security.

## **1.5 Other nuclear weapon states**

1.5.1 The specific challenges to a stable rules-based order posed by Russia, China and North Korea have already been discussed. In the case of Russia, the direct threats to the UK and its NATO allies present a threat to national security.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-iran-nuclear-deal>

1.5.2 There are five recognised nuclear weapon states (the UK, the US, France, China and Russia), and four others (India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan). Several of the nuclear weapon states are in the process of expanding or modernising their nuclear arsenals. This includes the UK.

## 1.6 Increased nuclear risk

1.6.1 The risk of nuclear weapons being used is rising. The following factors are contributing to increasing nuclear risk:

- *New technologies* - this includes the development of space-based, anti-satellite and hypersonic technologies<sup>23</sup>. Such emerging technologies are not currently subject to arms control agreements. Uncontrolled development of these technologies could increase the risk of the use of nuclear weapons.
- *Dual-capable military equipment* - for example, this can be used for the deployment of nuclear or conventional missiles. The use of such equipment could increase the risk of nuclear strike by misunderstanding or misperception.
- *Low-yield (tactical) nuclear weapons* - the technological capabilities for low-yield nuclear weapons are not new, but, as discussed earlier in this section, are an increasing focus for some nuclear weapon states.
- *Modernisation programmes* - as set out above, many nuclear weapon states are in the process of modernising their nuclear arsenals, and some are expanding their stockpile of warheads. That includes the UK, following the UK Government's announcement in 2021 that it would lift the cap on the stockpile of nuclear weapons. The UK's nuclear weapons programme is discussed at further length in section 2.
- *Deteriorating arms control* - the abrogation of the INF Treaty is a regrettable step which increases nuclear risk. At the time of writing, Russia has also suspended its participation in the New START Treaty (see Section 4).
- *Non-state actors and nuclear terrorism* - the UK Government's 2021 Integrated Review states that, "[i]t is likely that a terrorist group will launch a successful CBRN [chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear] attack by 2030." The 2018

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<sup>23</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/338/338.pdf>, p.94

US Nuclear Posture Review states that, “[n]uclear terrorism remains among the most significant threats to the security of the United States, allies, and partners”.

## 2 The UK government and nuclear weapons

2.0.1 The UK nuclear arsenal stands at an estimated 225 warheads - of which around 120 are deployed<sup>24</sup>.

2.0.2 The most recent significant statement of current UK policy on nuclear weapons was provided in the 2021 Integrated Review:

*“The fundamental purpose of our nuclear weapons is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression...”*

*“...To ensure that our deterrent is not vulnerable to pre-emptive action by potential adversaries, we will maintain our four submarines so that at least one will always be on a Continuous At Sea Deterrent patrol. Our submarines on patrol are at several days’ notice to fire and, since 1994, we do not target our missiles at any state. We remain committed to maintaining the minimum destructive power needed to guarantee that the UK’s nuclear deterrent remains credible and effective against the full range of state nuclear threats from any direction.”*

*“...The UK’s nuclear weapons are operationally independent and only the Prime Minister can authorise their use. This ensures that political control is maintained at all times. We would consider using our nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO Allies.*

*While our resolve and capability to do so if necessary is beyond doubt, we will remain deliberately ambiguous about precisely when, how and at what scale we would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons.”*

### 2.1 The UK’s nuclear deterrent

2.1.1 The House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee describe the UK’s nuclear deterrent as follows:

*“The UK operates a single platform nuclear deterrent with four Vanguard-class SSBNs (Ship Submersible Ballistic Nuclear, otherwise known as nuclear armed nuclear powered submarines). At least one boat is always providing a Continuous At Sea Deterrence (CASD),*

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<sup>24</sup> <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>  
Spring Conference 2023

*carrying 40 nuclear warheads and up to eight operational Trident D5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The system is often known as Trident.*<sup>25</sup>

## **2.2 Trident renewal**

2.2.1 The Vanguard-class submarines, which have been in operation since the early 1990s, are due to reach the end of their operational lifespan in the 2030s.

2.2.2 The like-for-like replacement plan (involving the construction of four successor 'Dreadnought' class submarines) was approved by Parliament in 2016. The Dreadnought submarines are currently under construction in Barrow-in-Furness. The first submarine was meant to enter into service in 2028, but the programme has been pushed back to the early 2030s.

2.2.3 The UK Government updates Parliament annually on the construction of the Dreadnought submarines. In the latest update (December 2021), the Ministry of Defence stated that, "[the] programme continues to remain within overall budget and on track for the First of Class, HMS Dreadnought, to enter service in the early 2030s."

2.2.4 Steel has been cut for the first two submarines. While construction has not begun for the third and fourth submarines, manufacture is underway for the nuclear propulsion plants as well as procurement for long lead items<sup>26</sup>. The total cost of the construction programme is estimated at £31 billion, with a £10 billion contingency. As of March 2021, over £10 billion has been spent on the programme.

2.2.5 While public figures are not available at the time of writing, our understanding is that scrapping even the fourth submarine at this stage would not produce any cost savings for the public purse in terms of construction costs. This is due to the fact that contracts have already been signed for the acquisition of these assets.

2.2.5 While the Dreadnought programme is currently within budget, it is vital that such an expensive programme is not subject to cost overruns. Parliamentary opportunities for scrutiny of the Dreadnought construction programme are currently very limited. While there are understandable national security concerns regarding the construction, transparency should be facilitated to the maximum possible degree.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/338/338.pdf>, p.24

<sup>26</sup>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-united-kingdoms-future-nuclear-deterrent-the-2021-update-to-parliament/the-united-kingdoms-future-nuclear-deterrent-the-2021-update-to-parliament>

- Parliament should establish a joint annual review into the progress of the acquisition of the Dreadnought-class submarines, to be carried out by the Public Accounts Committee and the Defence Committee.
- The UK Government should increase the frequency of Ministerial updates regarding the acquisition to a biannual basis.

## **2.3 The UK's nuclear warheads**

2.3.1 In February 2020, the Conservative Government announced plans to replace the UK's nuclear warheads. In its most recent update to Parliament (December 2021), the Government stated that the programme is in "preliminary stages" - with the new warheads due to be available in the 2030s.

2.3.2 The process of developing new warheads will be managed by the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE). The UK is unable to test nuclear explosions, as a signatory to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1996 (see section 4). This is the first time the UK has developed new nuclear warheads since it signed the Treaty. Experts have warned that there are "serious problems" regarding the AWE's plans, despite funding injections of £20 billion since 2005, which includes the construction of new test infrastructure which is severely delayed and over-budget<sup>27</sup>.

2.3.4 The NAO estimates the cost of the new programme at £7 billion<sup>28</sup>. To help prevent serious cost overruns, the opportunities for Parliament to scrutinise the development of the UK's replacement warhead should be expanded.

## **2.4 Increase in nuclear stockpile**

2.4.1 In Government, Liberal Democrats secured a commitment to reduce the nuclear stockpile ceiling from 225 to 180 warheads by the mid-2020s. However, as part of the 2021 Integrated Review, the Conservative Government announced plans to increase the stockpile cap to 260 warheads.

2.4.2 Liberal Democrats condemned the Government's decision as a direct contravention of the UK's obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. By signing and ratifying the NPT, the UK committed to take disarmament seriously. Conservative

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/is-the-uk-capable-of-maintaining-its-nuclear-arsenal>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-Equipment-Plan-2021-2031.pdf>

Ministers have refused to accept that their plans pose any difficulty for the UK's NPT obligations. We disagree. The Government must reverse these plans immediately<sup>29</sup>.

## **2.5 Other developments**

2.5.1 As part of the Integrated Review, the Conservative Government also took steps to reverse long-standing policy on transparency, by deciding not to produce public figures on the operational stockpile, or deployed warhead or deployed missile numbers any longer.

2.5.2 The Review also indicated more environments in which the UK would use nuclear weapons. While the Government recommitted to the policy of not using, or threatening to use, nuclear weapons against non-Nuclear Weapon State signatories to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Review also stated that the UK Government “reserve[s] the right to review this assurance if the future threat of weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical and biological capabilities, or emerging technologies that could have a comparable impact, makes it necessary”. The change in the UK Government’s nuclear weapons policy in the Integrated Review is highly regrettable.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/18/uk-trident-plan-incompatible-with-non-proliferation-treaty-peers-told>

### **3 The Liberal Democrat approach**

3.0.1 The Liberal Democrat approach to the question of nuclear weapons has always been underpinned by our liberal values, most notably those of international law, human rights, internationalism, and the pursuit of peace.

It is from these values that we derive two key beliefs:

1. The UK has a duty to protect its citizens.
2. The UK has legal and moral obligations to pursue global nuclear disarmament, which would fulfil our obligations under international law and make the world safer for everyone.

#### **3.1 A minimum credible nuclear deterrent**

3.1.1 If possession of a credible, minimum nuclear deterrent represents a necessary (though not sufficient) part of the UK upholding its duty to protect its citizens, then retention of such a deterrent is justified. Liberal Democrats believe that this condition is fulfilled in the present circumstances.

3.1.2 As discussed previously, Russia poses direct challenges to the security of both the UK and our allies. Russia has made veiled threats as to its readiness to use nuclear weapons, on the battlefield or elsewhere, including potentially against the UK. The possession of nuclear weapons serves as a deterrence against a first strike by Russia, preventing the UK and NATO allies from being blackmailed by such threats.

3.1.3 The UK's nuclear deterrent also serves a defensive purpose against attacks using conventional weaponry, in particular those aimed at our NATO allies. The UK's nuclear weapons are declared for the defence of NATO, and play an important role in NATO's nuclear posture. If Ukraine had still possessed nuclear weapons, it is highly unlikely that Russia would have invaded. Russia has not invaded our NATO allies, which are protected by the UK's nuclear deterrent (which is assigned to NATO).

3.1.4 Third, as set out in the previous section, significant questions remain regarding the willingness of Russia to use nuclear weapons in relation to the Ukraine conflict. Nuclear risk may increase and the UK and NATO allies may come closer into conflict with Russia. It is plausible that in such scenarios, the possession of the UK's nuclear deterrent will offer further protection to the people of the UK and of our NATO allies.



3.1.5 It is clear, therefore, that the UK's nuclear deterrent serves an important national security function, and may continue to do so as this current conflict develops.

3.1.6 As established, the UK's nuclear deterrent also plays a key defensive role for NATO. Given the security challenges posed by Russia to many of our NATO allies, NATO must retain all the necessary elements of a credible nuclear deterrent. The UK's nuclear weapons play a key protective role for NATO.

3.1.7 Where challenges are posed by other nuclear weapon states (China, North Korea and Iran), they do not constitute direct or imminent threats which the UK's deterrent protects against. However, in this unstable global security environment, it is plausible that these challenges develop in ways which would necessitate the retention of such a deterrent in the future. It is possible that the UK is dragged into a future conflict with one of these nuclear weapon states - for example, in the case of an invasion of Taiwan by China. In such a circumstance, a credible, minimum nuclear deterrent could serve an important national security purpose.

- The UK Government should maintain a minimum, credible nuclear deterrent.

3.1.8 In the course of the consultation process which informed this paper, some have suggested that the UK should give up its nuclear deterrent as it would continue to be protected under NATO's nuclear umbrella, i.e., by the United States. Liberal Democrats believe that the UK should act as a responsible leader within NATO. Given the threat posed by Russia, a decision to disarm would be an abandonment of that leadership. It would also send the wrong signal to our European allies as they would undoubtedly question the UK's commitment and determination to come to their defence.

3.1.9 There is also strategic value for NATO in having more than one nuclear power. In the event of changing political circumstances in one of the nuclear weapon states, the presence of multiple powers with nuclear weapons sustains the security guarantee among NATO members. The Trump presidency cast doubt upon the US's commitment to NATO, and we are concerned about how the 2024 US Presidential elections might impact upon the US's commitments to European security.

## **3.2 Delivery systems**

3.2.1 As discussed in Section 2, the delivery mechanism of the UK's nuclear deterrent is submarine-based, and specifically referred to as SSBN (Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear).

3.2.2 Our 2017 policy paper on nuclear weapons, *Towards a World Free of Nuclear Weapons*, explored alternative delivery systems, but concluded that such systems presented more obvious targets for potential opponents. Liberal Democrats maintain that SSBNs are the safest, most defensible and least detectable delivery system for nuclear warheads. Furthermore, given that two of the Dreadnought-class submarines are now under construction, we believe that a decision to change the delivery system in the next Parliament would be difficult to justify on a financial basis.

### **3.3 Nuclear posture and the role of Continuous At-Sea Deterrent**

3.3.1 Our 2017 policy paper concluded that the UK's nuclear posture could be changed while maintaining a credible deterrent. The paper proposed taking a step down the nuclear ladder from Continuous At-Sea Deterrent to a medium-readiness responsive posture, "that provides minimum deterrence by maintaining armed patrols without continuous at-sea deployment". This approach would most likely require the procurement of three Dreadnought-class submarines, rather than four.

3.3.2 Underpinning that approach, however, was the belief that, "[t]he current CASD posture could be safely discontinued without threatening the UK's security." The 2017 policy paper also reserved the right to return to a higher-state of readiness, with continuous patrols, "if threats became more imminent".

3.3.3 We have already concluded above that the security challenges facing the UK necessitate the retention of a credible, minimum nuclear deterrent. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created a new and concerning set of security challenges for the UK which are significantly different from those faced in 2017. These imminent challenges mean that a change in the UK's nuclear posture, to a medium-responsiveness posture, would weaken the credibility of the UK's nuclear deterrent.

3.3.4 When Russia is making veiled threats regarding its willingness to use nuclear weapons, taking a step down the nuclear ladder by ending CASD would send the wrong signal. It would risk giving the impression that Putin's threats have been effective, which could embolden him to further nuclear brinkmanship. Furthermore, at a time when our NATO allies feel that they are under direct threat, such a step would also inevitably cast doubt on the UK's willingness to come to their defence.

3.3.5 A move down the nuclear ladder at a moment when it is so unlikely to be reciprocated would sadly do nothing to further our ambitions for global disarmament.

We must acknowledge that the security environment sets a crucial context for the likelihood of progress in international disarmament negotiations.

3.3.6 The conditions for a medium-responsiveness posture are no longer present. Moving away from CASD at this uncertain and volatile time would not be in the interests of the UK or our allies. We therefore believe that the UK should maintain the current posture of Continuous At-Sea Deterrent, and that our plan to move down from CASD should remain a credible option for UK leadership on nuclear disarmament, if and when the strategic environment is conducive to progress.

## 4 Global disarmament and the UK

4.0.1 Liberal Democrats have a proud tradition of being the most forward-thinking UK party on disarmament. We have a long-held commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons. We also strongly believe that the UK Government should uphold international law, including its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

4.0.2 The UK has legal and moral obligations to pursue the aim of global disarmament. The challenging security environment, and rising nuclear risk in Europe and around the world are not reasons to give up on the broader nuclear disarmament agenda. Indeed, they should embolden the UK to make a renewed push. While we are realistic about the chances of significant success in the current context, it is vital that opportunities which arise as the global security environment changes are not squandered in the way which those which arose at the end of the Cold War were.

4.0.3 There is much that the UK Government can do in the meantime to pursue disarmament. Liberal Democrats support:

- Reversing plans to increase the cap on the stockpile of nuclear weapons; and associated reductions in transparency commitments.
- Publicly recommitting to the UK's obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.
- Reduce nuclear risk by establishing a 'No First Use' policy for its nuclear weapons.
- Making the pursuit of global nuclear disarmament a diplomatic priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.
- Look to engage more deeply with non-nuclear weapon states on disarmament initiatives, including the Stockholm Initiative and the proponents of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (the 'Ban Treaty'), while acknowledging that the UK cannot sign the Ban Treaty.
- Given the unlikelihood of disarmament developments with Russia, exploring opportunities to pursue disarmament initiatives with other nuclear weapon states, including those which have not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

## 4.1 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)

4.1.1 The NPT is the cornerstone of global non-proliferation and disarmament initiatives. The Treaty originally entered into force in 1970, and 191 states have joined the Treaty, including the UK, France, the US, Russia and China.

4.1.2 The Treaty's aims are:

- "to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology;
- to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy;
- and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament"<sup>30</sup>

4.1.3 Article VI of the Treaty concerns disarmament. It reads as follows:

*"Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."*<sup>31</sup>

4.1.4 The UK has disarmament obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The 2021 decision to increase the stockpile of nuclear weapons is a clear breach of the UK's obligations under the Treaty. The increase of the nuclear stockpile, and associated attempts to limit transparency of the UK's stockpile and posture, run contrary to the UK's moral and legal obligations. They make attempts to move closer towards global disarmament harder. Liberal Democrats condemn this decision, and urge the Government to reverse it immediately.

4.1.5 Furthermore, the UK Government should publicly recommit to its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Under Article VIII of the Treaty, a conference shall be held every 5 years to review the Treaty's operation. The most recent Review Conference (RevCon) took place in August 2022 (having been postponed from 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic).

4.1.6 The 2022 RevCon offered the UK Government an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to pursuing its disarmament obligations. Regrettably, the Conference ended without reaching substantive agreement due to Russia's opposition. Even the draft final document was criticised by non-nuclear weapon states as lacking significant

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>

measures on nuclear disarmament. The UK was a co-signatory to a joint statement issued by 40 countries which reaffirmed their support for the Non-Proliferation Treaty and criticised Russia<sup>32</sup>. The 2022 RevCon was a missed opportunity. The UK Government should go further in future, and announce that it will make disarmament a diplomatic priority.

- The UK Government should make clear that attempting to lead multilateral disarmament must be a key part of the UK's foreign policy agenda, and a diplomatic priority.

## **4.2 Diplomatic initiatives and the P5 Process**

4.2.1 The P5 Process is a diplomatic initiative established by the UK Government in the 2000s, which sees the UK, USA, China, France and Russia meet on a regular basis to discuss their commitments under the NPT. The chair of the Process rotates between each country annually - its current chair is the United States.

4.2.2 Following the 2018 Salisbury attacks, the Process was paused. It was recommenced in 2019. In January 2022, the leaders of the P5 countries issued a joint statement, reaffirming that, "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought"<sup>33</sup>. In February 2022, the UK Government set out its ambition to, "[deepen] our work within the P5 Process on reducing the risk of nuclear conflict through misinterpretation and miscalculation, and also in enhancing mutual trust and global security."<sup>34</sup>

4.2.3 Liberal Democrats welcome this stated ambition and urge the UK Government to set out the steps planned to achieve it. The Russia/Ukraine war risks disrupting the P5 process. It is vital that the UK Government and our allies do what they can to keep the P5 process operational during this present crisis.

## **4.3 Verification**

4.3.1 Verification has been described as a "key pillar of the disarmament infrastructure": without reliable verification, how can we trust a nuclear weapon state when it says it has disarmed?<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> <https://press.un.org/en/2022/dc3850.doc.htm>

<sup>33</sup>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arm-s-races>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/conference-on-disarmament-high-level-week-uk-statement>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.un.org/disarmament/update/nuclear-disarmament-verification/>

4.3.2 Unlike in many other areas, where the UK's stated commitments to disarmament have not been matched by its actions, when it comes to verification the UK has been playing an important role. The UK has worked first bilaterally with Norway (the UK-Norway Initiative) from 2007, and then multilaterally from 2015 with the US, Norway and Sweden (the Quad Nuclear Verification Partnership). In 2015, the UK also became part of the International Partnership on Nuclear Disarmament Verification.

4.3.3 The UK's work on verification does not involve all Nuclear Weapons States - it can therefore continue to pursue and make meaningful progress on verification, despite the Russia/Ukraine war.

- Liberal Democrats would recommit the UK to verification work - including by making available increased financial resources for such vital research.

#### **4.4 De-alerting and declaratory policy**

4.4.1 De-alerting involves reducing the alert status of nuclear forces<sup>36</sup>.

4.4.2 By moving away from a 'hair-trigger' posture, nuclear weapon states can reduce the risk of accidental use of nuclear weapons by mistake or miscommunication. Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, Putin declared a 'special combat duty regime' for Russian nuclear weapons - possibly meaning a step up in terms of alert level. The US did not increase its alert level.

4.4.3 Liberal Democrats would continue to pursue steps to de-alert the use of nuclear weapons on a collective basis, working with other nuclear weapon states.

4.4.4 The UK Government should also re-evaluate the existing declaratory policy regarding the use of the nuclear deterrent. The 2021 Integrated Review justifies an expansion of the potential circumstances in which the UK might use nuclear weapons, on the basis that: "ambiguity complicates the calculations of potential aggressors, reduces the risk of deliberate nuclear use by those seeking a first-strike advantage, and contributes to strategic stability". We disagree. Ambiguity of this nature increases nuclear risk. The modernisation of nuclear arsenals and development of secure second-strike capabilities means that nuclear retaliation has become easier - and hence will be taken into account by an adversary who is considering a first strike.

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<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/international-relations-committee/the-nuclear-nonproliferation-treaty-and-nuclear-disarmament/oral/96576.html>, Q112

4.4.5 No First Use is currently the declaratory policy of both China and India. Some NATO states have previously urged NATO to move to a policy of No First Use, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada. In his 2020 presidential campaign, Joe Biden also expressed support for such a policy.

4.4.6 The original reluctance to declare 'no first use' during the Cold War was to provide a deterrent against an overwhelming ground attack on NATO members in Western Europe by the USSR, at a time when the Warsaw Pact possessed significantly greater conventional forces than NATO. However, in 2023 that military justification is no longer relevant. We are faced with a different context. It is NATO which has a significant numerical advantage over Russia in terms of conventional forces, not least considering that Russia has failed to make significant gains of territory in Ukraine over the last twelve months. Other nuclear weapon states such as China have maintained a 'No First Use' policy without the effectiveness of their deterrent being impacted.

4.4.7 Furthermore, a more explicit declaratory policy would help reduce nuclear risk by providing more certainty about the circumstances in which the UK would resort to the use of its nuclear weapons. It would also provide a means to engage other nuclear weapon states to encourage further measures to reduce nuclear risk and take steps down the nuclear ladder. Any move to a no first use pledge would, of course, be conducted in close consultation with our NATO allies.

- The UK Government should reduce nuclear risks by establishing a 'No First Use' policy for its nuclear weapons, via the P5 Process.

## **4.5 Engagement with non-nuclear weapon states**

4.5.1 Treating the subject of global disarmament as a matter solely for nuclear weapon states is an unproductive approach which risks alienating non-nuclear weapon states, and giving nuclear weapon states a special status from their very possession of nuclear weapons.

- The UK Government should look to engage more deeply with non-nuclear weapon states on disarmament initiatives, including through the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament and with proponents of the Ban Treaty.

### *Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament*

4.5.2 The Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament was formed in 2019. It is made up of a coalition of sixteen non-nuclear weapon states. The aim of the initiative is



to develop reasonable proposals as stepping stones which can guide the nuclear weapon states on a path towards further disarmament - rather than engage in a counterproductive attempt to pressure nuclear weapon states to change their stance entirely. Such steps involve the discussion of negative security assurances, further progress on nuclear risk reduction, and greater transparency including over nuclear posture<sup>37</sup>.

4.5.3 The UK Government has thus far actively engaged with the Stockholm Initiative. We urge the UK Government to go further. As an existing nuclear weapon state, the UK should look to bring other nuclear weapon states into a more constructive relationship with the Stockholm Initiative, with an aim of proactive engagement with the proposals developed by its members.

### *Ban Treaty*

4.5.4 The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (the Ban Treaty) was adopted in 2017, following a series of votes by the UN General Assembly. It has so far been signed by 86 countries, all of which are, necessarily, non-nuclear weapon states.

4.5.5 The Treaty, “includes a comprehensive set of prohibitions on participating in any nuclear weapon activities. These include undertakings not to develop, test, produce, acquire, possess, stockpile, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. The Treaty also prohibits the deployment of nuclear weapons on national territory and the provision of assistance to any State in the conduct of prohibited activities.”<sup>38</sup>

4.5.6 If the UK were to sign this Treaty, it would have to give up its nuclear weapons unilaterally. As such, no nuclear weapon state, or NATO member state, has signed the Treaty. The Treaty will not achieve its aims and is unlikely to contribute to progress towards disarmament. We do not believe that the UK should unilaterally give up its nuclear weapons. Therefore, the UK cannot become a signatory to the Ban Treaty in the present day.

4.5.7 It is important, however, to understand that the Ban Treaty was, in many respects, borne out of frustration from non-nuclear weapon states at the failure of nuclear weapon states, including the UK, to take their obligations towards disarmament under international law seriously.

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<sup>37</sup>

<https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Stepping-Stones-Approach-to-Nuclear-Disarmament-Diplomacy.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/tpnw/>

4.5.8 The UK's failure to participate in the various events which led to the passage of the Treaty was a missed opportunity<sup>39</sup>. This failure forms part of a credibility gap between the commitments of the UK to disarmament in international law, and its actions.

4.5.9 The House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee has recommended, "the Government should adopt a less aggressive tone about this treaty and seek opportunities to work with its supporters towards the aims of Article 6 of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty"<sup>40</sup>.

4.5.10 The Liberal Democrats support the global rules based order, as part of which the UN is so crucial. We regret that the Conservative Government failed to engage with the process of negotiating the Ban Treaty.

- The UK Government should engage with the proponents of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, while acknowledging it cannot sign the Treaty.

## **4.6 Arms control treaties**

### **4.6.1 *New START: New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty***

4.6.1.1 The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty - also known as New START - came into force in 2011. Under the terms of the Treaty, by 2018, the US and Russia could not breach the following limits:

*"700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deployed submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments;*

*1,550 nuclear warheads on deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments (each such heavy bomber is counted as one warhead toward this limit);*

*800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers, and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments."*<sup>41</sup>

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<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/international-relations-committee/the-nuclear-nonproliferation-treaty-and-nuclear-disarmament/oral/94504.html>, Q32

<sup>40</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/338/338.pdf>, p.63

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.state.gov/new-start/>

4.6.1.2 The Treaty contains transparency and verification measures to ensure treaty compliance. These include:

- Onsite inspections
- Biannual data exchanges
- Notification prior to launch of ballistic missiles covered under the treaty.

4.6.1.3 After significant deliberation regarding whether the Treaty would be extended beyond its original agreed duration of 10 years, the US and Russia reached an agreement for its extension until 2026. This treaty has remained in operation, thus far, throughout the conflict in Ukraine. However, talks due to be held in late 2022 regarding the resumption of mutual inspections (which ceased due to the Covid-19 pandemic) were postponed unilaterally by Russia. In February 2023, close to the one-year anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, Russia suspended its participation in the treaty - in effect formalising the lack of inspections.

4.6.1.4 Russia is yet to fully withdraw from the treaty. However, if Russia does freeze its participation, that means Russia may cease to notify the US each time nuclear-capable missiles are moved, maintained, decommissioned or put into storage. This would represent an increase in nuclear risk.

- The UK Government should make clear to the US Administration that New START should be maintained, with Russian participation resumed, if at all possible throughout the current conflict.

4.6.1.5 Transparency measures are a key step to ensure parties avoid rash mistakes or confused signals. Crucially, this is in the mutual self-interest of all parties involved.

4.6.1.6 The BASIC think tank has recommended the other nuclear weapon states begin: “to explore how they could adopt some of the transparency measures the United States and Russia accept under New START<sup>42</sup>.”

4.6.1.7 Liberal Democrats urge the UK Government to engage with other nuclear weapon states regarding bilateral adoption of transparency measures. An attractive factor of this approach is that it would not have to involve Russia, and instead could be undertaken with other nuclear weapon states.

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<https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Stepping-Stones-Approach-to-Nuclear-Disarmament-Diplomacy.pdf>, p.29

## **4.6.2 Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty**

4.6.2.1 A Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty would involve banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices - those materials being, most significantly, highly enriched uranium and plutonium<sup>43</sup>.

4.6.2.2 All of the nuclear weapon states which are signatories to the Non-Proliferation Treaty have expressed a willingness to support such a Treaty - indeed, other than China, all these states have officially ceased production of such material (and China "is widely believed to not have produced fissile material since 1991"<sup>44</sup>).

4.6.2.3 According to the UK Government, "The UK has had a moratorium in place on the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices since 1995 and is committed to the pursuit of an international treaty that would put an end to the future production of fissile material for such purposes."<sup>45</sup>

4.6.2.4 Progress on such a Treaty has been stymied, with political will identified as a key factor<sup>46</sup>. However, further progress towards ratification of the Treaty by nuclear weapon states would be a hugely significant step. Ultimately, ratification would facilitate efforts to implement a global cap on the number of nuclear warheads.

4.6.2.5 Significantly, Russia no longer produces fissile material. We urge the UK Government to continue engagement with other nuclear weapon states, including those which have not signed the NPT, in pursuit of ratification of the Treaty.

- The UK Government should continue engagement with nuclear weapon states which are yet to sign the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty.

## **4.6.3 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty**

4.6.3.1 The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban (CTBT) treaty prohibits "any nuclear weapon test explosion or any other nuclear explosion globally". The CTBT was agreed in 1996 - but is yet to enter into force<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.un.org/disarmament/fissile-material/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://basicint.org/prospecting-for-a-fissile-material-cut-off-treaty-opportunities-to-re-engage/>

<sup>45</sup>

[http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2013-0862/Fissile\\_Material\\_Cut-Off\\_Treaty\\_-\\_UK\\_note.pdf](http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2013-0862/Fissile_Material_Cut-Off_Treaty_-_UK_note.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> <https://basicint.org/prospecting-for-a-fissile-material-cut-off-treaty-opportunities-to-re-engage/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/ctbt/>

4.6.3.2 This is because the Treaty has not yet been ratified by China; North Korea; Egypt; India; Iran; Israel; Pakistan and the USA. China and the USA have signed the treaty, but not ratified it (and have not carried out any nuclear tests since the 1990s). The UK Government has signed and ratified the Treaty - and has called on those remaining countries necessary for the ratification of the Treaty to do so "as soon as possible"<sup>48</sup>.

4.6.3.3 Given Russia has already ratified this Treaty, further diplomatic efforts with other nuclear weapon states to ratify the CTBT should be pursued.

- The UK Government should continue to encourage remaining countries which have not ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty to do so.

#### **4.6.4 *Limits on the use of new technologies***

4.6.4.1 Tactical nuclear weapons differ from 'strategic' nuclear weapons: "they are envisaged to be used in fighting and winning a war, as opposed to strategic nuclear weapons, which are used to deter conflict."<sup>49</sup> The UK does not possess any tactical nuclear weapons.

- The UK Government should rule out development of tactical nuclear weapons.

4.6.4.2 As discussed in the previous section, developing technologies such as tactical nuclear weapons pose unacceptable risks. This has been made clearer during the course of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The principle of mutually assured destruction does not apply to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. This is deeply worrying.

4.6.4.3 We are very concerned by the potential for a tactical nuclear weapon arms race, as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

4.6.4.4 While consensus will be difficult to achieve while the current conflict is ongoing, the UK Government must seek commitment from the other nuclear weapon states in regards to tactical nuclear weapons. It is imperative that the nuclear weapon states collectively declare that they will not use tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield. The UK Government should use the P5 process to discuss arms control measures regarding tactical nuclear weapons.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/338/338.pdf>, p.79

<sup>49</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/338/338.pdf>, p.16

- The UK Government should use the P5 process to discuss arms control measures regarding tactical nuclear weapons.

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