

Note on Nuclear Weapon Announcements in the United Kingdom's Integrated Review of Security etc.

Summary

The United Kingdom government recently announced, in the context of an integrated policy review, that it will move to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 (from a previous target of no more than 180) and that it will extend its longstanding policy of deliberate ambiguity by no longer making public figures for its operational stockpile, deployed warheads and deployed missiles.

These decisions are best seen as symptomatic of a belief that the United Kingdom's and NATO's security environment has been deteriorating and that now Russia in particular poses a grave threat to the Kingdom and its NATO allies. Pugwash has an opportunity to react constructively to the decisions by exploring the reasons for the heightening of NATO/Russian tensions in recent years.

Additionally, use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear aggressors in certain circumstances is envisaged (extension to the policy of deliberate ambiguity may be connected to this) and the right to review the UK's negative security assurance to Non-Nuclear Weapon States is reserved. But nuclear weapon use in response to cyber-attacks and against non-state actors is ruled out, and the UK's nuclear weapon submarines will remain at several days' notice to fire.

Detail

The context of these changes in the UK's nuclear weapons policy is a strategic review of "security, defence, development and foreign policy". Being the first review of UK strategy since the 2016 decision to withdraw from the European Union, and inviting comparison with strategic reviews done in 2010 and 2015, the 2021 review suggests a wish to convince readers that EU withdrawal has enhanced the UK's potential to be an important actor on the global stage. In particular, the 2021 review dwells on economic and political interests in the Indo/Pacific region and it sets out the capabilities, actual and aspirational, that the Kingdom can bring to bear on the pursuit of those interests. Nonetheless, it recognises that the North Atlantic area remains the primary concern of UK defence policies.

Increase in the Overall Nuclear Weapons Stockpile

"In 2010 the Government stated an intent to reduce our overall nuclear warhead stockpile ceiling from not more than 225 to not more than 180 by the mid-2020s. However, in recognition of the evolving security environment, including the developing range of technological and doctrinal threats, this is no longer possible, and the UK will move to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads"

Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR), 15 March 2021

The most specific and most logical explanation for this decision came in a TV interview that the Secretary of State for Defence gave on 21 March. He referred to improvements in Russian missile defences and implied that these meant the UK's nuclear deterrent must grow in size to remain credible. UK governments have long taken a capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on Moscow as a yardstick for the credibility of the UK deterrent. Russia is thought to have

been strengthening Moscow's anti-ballistic missile defences in the context of a major upgrade of its anti-access and area-denial capabilities, lessons having been drawn from the first and second Iraq wars and NATO's 1999 aerial assault on Serbia.

However, the Integrated Review itself contains no reference to Russian missile defences. Instead, it refers to a wider, more amorphous range of threats, which has been described as "a deteriorating security environment."

"We have previously identified risks to the UK from major nuclear armed states, emerging nuclear states, and state-sponsored nuclear terrorism. Those risks have not gone away. Some states are now significantly increasing and diversifying their nuclear arsenals. They are investing in novel nuclear technologies and developing new 'warfighting' nuclear systems which they are integrating into their military strategies and doctrines and into their political rhetoric to seek to coerce others. The increase in global competition, challenges to the international order, and proliferation of potentially disruptive technologies all pose a threat to strategic stability.... We will continue to keep our nuclear posture under constant review in light of the international security environment and the actions of potential adversaries." (IR)

This explanation seems to lack logic. It is far from obvious that increases and improvements in another state's nuclear forces require increases in a retaliatory nuclear force judged to be assured (because invulnerable to a first strike) and credible (because capable of causing a potential aggressor unacceptable damage). Nonetheless, this is the explanation to which the Integrated Review gives pride of place.

British Pugwash has heard it said that these risk concerns centre on Russia, China, North Korea (DPRK) and Iran. Here, too, an element of illogicality enters in. China has stated publicly that it does not intend to be the first to use nuclear weapons in the event of a confrontation with an adversary, and it is hard to imagine the UK intending to be the initiator of a nuclear exchange with China. The North Korean government is preoccupied with what it sees as an existential threat from the United States of America. Iran is not thought to have resumed the research into nuclear weapon design and manufacture that it abandoned in 2003; its Supreme Leader has issued a *fatwa* against the possession and use of nuclear weapons; in agreeing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Iran pledged to remain a Non-Nuclear Weapon State; Iran does not possess a missile capable of reaching Western Europe; and Iran has offered to refrain from developing missiles with ranges in excess of 2000 km.

It is probable, therefore, that these risk concerns centre essentially on the weapon systems and military doctrines of Russia, and that they are felt as much from a NATO perspective as from a national UK perspective. A country assessment of Russia in the review includes this passage:

"The UK respects the people, culture and history of Russia. However, until relations with its government improve, we will actively deter and defend against the full spectrum of threats emanating from Russia. Through NATO, we will ensure a united Western response, combining our military, diplomatic and intelligence assets in support of collective security..... We will also support others in the Eastern European neighbourhood and beyond to build their resilience to state threats."

This is not the place to explore why the British government has formed a view that the United Kingdom and NATO now face a grave "*spectrum of threats*" from Russia. Several possible reasons will occur to anyone who has been taking an interest in the evolving character of Russia's relations with NATO members since 2012. Suffice it to say that this grim

assessment contrasts with the 2010 strategic review (which set the stockpile target at no more than 180):

“No state currently has both the intent and the capability to threaten the independence or integrity of the UK. But we cannot dismiss the possibility that a major direct nuclear threat to the UK might re-emerge – a state’s intent in relation to the use or threat of use of its capabilities could change relatively quickly, and while we will continue to work internationally to enhance mutual trust and security, we cannot rule out a major shift in the international security situation which would put us under grave threat.”

The 2021 assessment also goes some way beyond the assessment in the 2015 strategic review. The latter confines its Russian threat perception to the following sentence:

“Though highly unlikely, we cannot rule out the possibility that it [Russia] may feel tempted to act aggressively against NATO Allies.”

Belief in a re-born Russian threat thus seems to be the leading explanation for the decision to increase the overall weapons stockpile. Two other possible factors mention merit, however, before turning to the decision to expand a longstanding policy of ambiguity to embrace actual stockpile and deployed nuclear weapon numbers.

One is a possible fear that in time improvements in offensive underwater technologies will affect the invulnerability of the UK’s strategic missile submarines. Behind the stockpile increase could lie an intention to maintain more than one such submarine on patrol on a routine basis.

However, an IISS commentary on the Integrated Review casts doubt on the feasibility of a two-vessel routine, at least until a new generation of submarines enters service during the 2030s:

“There are, however, potential constraints to that scenario. Among them are the well-publicised problems with the refits and serviceability of the current Vanguard class, which have recently made it challenging to maintain the minimum Continuous At Sea Deterrence requirement of one submarine on patrol.” (The UK and nuclear warheads – stretching credibility?, 26 March 2021)

Second, it could be that officials have come to the view that the 2010 decision to cut the stockpile to 180 by 2025, re-confirmed in 2015, and to deploy no more than 40 warheads on routine patrol, was ill-judged and that the stockpile needs to grow, irrespective of changes in the strategic environment and threat perceptions, to achieve credibility. This possibility has been hinted at in British Pugwash’s hearing but there is no hard evidence for it.

Withholding of Missile and Warhead Numbers

“We will remain deliberately ambiguous about precisely when, how and at what scale we would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons. Given the changing security and technological environment, we will extend this long-standing policy of deliberate ambiguity and no longer give public figures for our operational stockpile, deployed warhead or deployed missile numbers. This 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.” (IR)

Two additional explanations for this prizing of ambiguity come to mind.

The first is that the UK government intends to deploy nuclear weapon systems to deter sub-strategic nuclear and non-nuclear threats to NATO on its North East front, but does not wish to reveal the number of systems designated for this purpose that will be on routine patrol at any one time. A Q & A paper issued some weeks after the Integrated Review suggests that this explanation is unlikely. In it the Ministry of Defence affirms that none of the UK's nuclear weapons are "designed for tactical use during conflict"; instead, they exist to "deter the most extreme threats to national security".

However, this formulation seems to leave open the possibility that 'low-yield' strategic systems will be deployed routinely in case a need for their use in sub-strategic/tactical contexts arises. That possibility is also left open by statements in the review that the UK's nuclear weapons are committed to the defence of both the Kingdom and NATO allies, and that "*their fundamental purpose*" is, *inter alia*, to deter "*aggression*", the qualifier "nuclear" being omitted..

The second possibility is that the UK government has come to view a greater lack of transparency as a necessary adjunct to maintaining the option of using nuclear weapons in retaliation for chemical or biological attacks and to cope with threats which emerging technologies may pose:

"We reserve the right to review this [Negative Security] 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." (IR)

The impression sought is perhaps that the United Kingdom will have sufficient systems deployed at any one time to be able to respond to non-nuclear WMD and emerging technology threats without impairing the credibility of its strategic deterrent.

To end on some positive notes. The Integrated Review indicates that when on patrol the UK's strategic submarines will continue to be at several days' notice to fire. The review states that "*since 1994, we do not target our missiles at any state.*" It seems, from what British Pugwash has heard, that the option of using nuclear weapons against non-state actors has been excluded. The MOD's Q & A paper rules out their use in response to cyber-attacks. And the UK government comes down firmly on the deterrence side of the deterrence/warfighting distinction:

"We would consider using our nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO Allies....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 fundamental purpose of our nuclear weapons is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression." (IR)

Conclusion

These changes in the UK's nuclear policy are regrettable. They amount to a step backwards and away from the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. They call into question the sincerity of the UK's advocacy of "step-by-step" movement in the direction of that vision. They raise doubt about the strength of the UK's commitment to full implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. They demonstrate that the United Kingdom is still wed to the doctrine of nuclear deterrence.

However, it would seem best for the Pugwash movement to channel concern over these decisions into a constructive initiative. One option would be for Pugwash to explore in some detail why the UK government (probably in the company of other NATO governments) has come to believe that Russia now poses a much graver threat to NATO than UK governments believed in 2010 and 2015. Such work would open up the possibility of Pugwash trying to contribute to a reduction in NATO/Russian tensions and would complement work to prevent a resumption of the nuclear arms race (see Pugwash Note on Arms Control and Disarmament, January 2021).

It is probably fanciful to imagine that the mutual confidence which characterised relations between Russia and NATO in the years that followed German re-unification can be re-built. But there is room for each side, NATO governments and the Russian government, to clarify the motives behind recent forms of behaviour that the other side has found objectionable, and to draw up mutually acceptable rules of the road for future co-existence.

The current climate of mutual incomprehension, suspicion and fear, of which the UK's latest strategic review appears to be a product, is pregnant with nuclear risk on both sides of the NATO/Russian border.

Peter Jenkins
British Pugwash,
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