

TO HAVE OR HAVE NOT? THE UK'S NUCLEAR OPTION

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THE world, as seen with a discerning eye, is at a crossroads. The afterglow of the century-defining Cold War was hopeful but short-lived, and the 'War on Terror' long in duration but short on accomplishment. In a slow but steady 21st-century plod, the world's collective attention span has become more aligned with the whims of the global media cycle than with a pervasive sense of right and wrong. Indeed, the world does seem rudderless and morally relativistic, as [Paul Johnson](#) describes in *Modern Times*; adrift at sea, at the mercy of currents that answer to none, save forces beyond our control. While the world can certainly celebrate many achievements from the turn of the century, it has derived a disproportionately minuscule amount of cohesion and momentum from those accomplishments as it trudges along in 2026.

"I know that the empire on which the sun never sets is still alive. It never died. It continued to exist, but in a different shape."

– Mouloud Benzadi

A microcosm of the current

global malaise might be the United Kingdom. When the [sun set on the Pitcairn Islands](#) last March, it set on the British Empire too. Few would argue that it was long in coming, with many dating back to the costly victory of the Second World War and the prestige lost after the Suez Crisis. Nevertheless, the Brits have deftly managed the empire afterglow, contrary to the dreary prediction of former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who claimed that the UK "[lost an empire](#) and has not yet found a role". Boasting the [sixth best economy in the world](#), a Commonwealth of 56 countries, permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, a leading role in NATO and a nuclear arsenal as one of only five countries legally authorised to do so, there are many reasons to reflect positively on the UK's present and future. While ambitions of an empire have long since waned, the UK remains a critical player on the world stage; pound-for-pound, it exhibits

more influence on global affairs than many other states endowed with greater population and geography.

Nevertheless, there are clouds in the sky, and potential for much darker ones just over the horizon. No state is immune to historic geopolitical issues that remain ubiquitous worldwide. But the UK, in particular, faces problems – while not existential in nature – that could fundamentally alter its standing and impact on global affairs.

The UK continues to struggle with a host of political, economic, military and social issues. Domestically, [government approval remains low](#), despite Labour's resounding election victory. The oft-maligned NHS remains a target for public scorn, while teacher and budget shortages continue to hinder education. Financial insecurity has affected [nearly half of UK adults](#), while climate concerns persist despite little

observable government action in policy implementation.

From a military perspective, the problems are diverse in scope and fundamental in scale. Recruiting remains [a recurring challenge](#). While visions of combat conducted by drones and clones rather than women and men have leapt from sci-fi movies to the battlefields of Ukraine, large-scale implementation is still well over the horizon. An ageing population, the abolition of conscription, more attractive private-sector opportunities, and the fading echoes of past British military victories have contributed to [a personnel shortage](#) deemed a "[perfect storm](#)". Government budget cuts have hampered recruitment efforts and made it impossible to offer more competitive compensation packages to retain personnel needed for mission-critical billets.

"Ukraine, I'll be very clear, is not the future of war. It is not the future, but many elements that have emerged from the war in Ukraine will influence all future wars." – Major General (Retd) Mick Ryan, Australian Army

Adding to existing budgetary



woes is the war in Ukraine. The UK has provided much-needed weapons systems to Ukraine, including Storm Shadow missiles, [despite limited stockpiles](#).

Additionally, the nature of warfare between Ukraine and Russia has laid bare the need for a paradigm-shifting reboot to adapt to the rapidly changing conduct of modern war. It is debatable if we are experiencing a revolution in military affairs. Nevertheless, it is beyond debate that significant changes have occurred. The '[drone wars](#)' are indeed upon us. Coupled with the critical importance of [electronic](#) and cyber warfare, the UK faces a monumental task of simultaneously adapting to the modern battlefield while adhering to the climate goals it has laid out in its Future Operating Environment 2035.

Nothing comes cheaply from the military-industrial complex, regardless of the country in which it resides. War is expensive, while peace is exceedingly pricey as well. With BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce and Babcock International among the prime beneficiaries, the UK government paid out over [£30 billion](#) to UK defence companies in 2024/25.

Given declining means and rising costs, how does the UK adapt to a changing battlefield that leaves it defence-rich but pound-poor? A careful analysis of the latest UK defence budget frames the debate and highlights items consuming the bulk of funding. Does the UK target big-ticket items? A wide collection of small ticket items? Should soldier benefits be targeted? The numbers are revealing, and the need to make changes is inevitable, but any choice is bound to provide decision-makers with paths forward rife with danger, whether for the ruling political party or the country.

Perhaps most problematic remains the nuclear question for 10 Downing Street. In comparison to other nuclear powers, what value does the nuclear weapons programme



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provide to the UK? Such an inquiry begets an even more uncomfortable, yet existential, question: should the UK continue to field a nuclear force? Or does funding need to be diverted to make the [fundamental changes](#) – an overwhelming consensus agrees – that the UK military needs to be effective on the Ukraine-inspired battlefields of tomorrow?

"Be careful above all things not to let go of the atomic weapon until you are sure, and more than sure that other means of preserving peace are in your hands."
– Winston Churchill

A practical entrance into such discourse is an examination of the UK's current nuclear force and its capabilities. Currently, the UK nuclear programme consists of four Vanguard-class submarines equipped with Trident missiles. The submarines are [past their planned service life](#) and, beginning in the 2030s, will be replaced by the new Dreadnought-class SSBN. The UK does not possess a nuclear triad, as do the People's Republic of China, Russia and the US; its sole nuclear option is maritime. Scope isn't the only issue; scale is problematic as well. Compared

with the five founding nuclear powers, the disparity in warhead numbers is significant. Russia and the US possess nuclear triads with over 5,000 warheads each. China also possesses a nuclear triad, but owns significantly fewer warheads, around 600. The UK and France possess even fewer warheads – [both under 300](#) – while neither possesses a nuclear triad.

Further problematic for the UK is its dependence on the US for crucial aspects of its nuclear weapons programme. The UK nuclear programme relies heavily on America; as of September 2024, that partnership has become permanent, with Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer [removing a sunset clause](#) on the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement, extending the UK's US-built Trident nuclear missile system. While the UK also purchases key components from the US, the UK nuclear programme is independent, and the decision to launch missiles is a strictly UK decision. Nevertheless, dependence on the US for key aspects of its nuclear programme puts Number 10 in a precarious position; malign US nuclear leverage could be wielded in the event of a separate UK-US spat

over non-defence issues, such as tariffs on consumer goods.

Perhaps most pressingly, the cost of the nuclear programme is exorbitant (despite varying estimates) and consumes a significant portion of the UK military budget. However, options for the UK to wean itself off US dependence are limited, time-consuming and could jeopardise the operational use of its nuclear programme. If the UK presses forward on its own, it will be costly. Initial estimates are a £15 billion investment in the Astraean nuclear warhead programme (to replace the [Holbrook warhead](#), built to fit the Trident II D5 missile) and in the Barrow and Raynesway sites for continuous submarine production.

"Begin, the Clone War has."
– Master Yoda in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*

While battlefield clones remain a sci-fi fantasy, artificial intelligence, robotics and drones are rapidly descending upon our operational reality. Such developments highlight the changing nature of warfare and have forced the UK to amass a laundry list of much-needed systems required to remain competitive on the battlefields of today and tomorrow. Unsurprisingly, none of these will be inexpensive. The Government has announced [significant investments](#) for:

■ Workforce and reserves: maximisation of the 'whole force' to increase the effectiveness of the UK's defensive capabilities. Increases to the active and reserve personnel will offset years of hollowing out the services.

■ The [Strategic Defence Review](#) calls for new partnerships with industry to ensure a rapid mobilisation to support military readiness in the event of contingency operations. Procurement reform is deemed critical to meeting these goals and will feature a segmented

approach to hasten contracting and accelerate procurement.

■ The £1 billion [Digital Targeting Web](#) will enhance integrated battlefield decision-making by enabling cross-domain targeting in the modern, digitalised operational environment.

■ A 'hybrid Navy' consisting of new SSNs as part of the AUKUS deal, the production of new SSN-AUKUS submarines, and an uncrewed surface vehicle.

■ Advances in artificial intelligence, improved long-range precision weapons and drone swarms like the American Replicator programme, without the hardware, software and production issues experienced by the US.

■ The new [Cyber & Specialist Operations Command](#) unites cyber and specialist capabilities under a single command. It will support all military branches and operate in all domains.

With considerable costs inevitable for such a list of needs, the Government must find the funding, but where does it come from for such an ambitious plan? Is there any evidence that the UK economy will consistently reach greater heights? Or that taxpayers will be willing to shoulder a larger tax burden? With the economy possibly mired in the "[production puzzle](#)" since the 2008 financial crisis and taxpayers experiencing stagnant incomes, increased poverty and rising prices, it is far from certain that Number 10 can push through a significant increase in defence spending to fulfil the sweeping recommendations of the Security Defence Review.

The UK nuclear programme, with its costs and [recent failures](#), offers some axe-wielding bureaucrats an ideal target to slash funds. However, the UK gains a considerable array of benefits from its nuclear weapons programme, in defence

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and in other, more intangible aspects. Practically, it serves as a deterrent to Russia. At the same time, some may lament the smaller number of UK nuclear weapons but its 200 warheads remain a potent force that can exact a considerable price on an adversary. Despite lacking two components for a nuclear triad, the UK does possess the most effective of the three; the nuclear submarine remains the bedrock of the nuclear triad, with its stealth and operating range making it the most effective second-strike platform. The UK's Royal Fleet Auxiliary ensures continuous global operations, ensuring a Vanguard submarine is always on station and could creep within an adversary's coastal waters and launch an attack that would decrease detection and response times. Beijing and Moscow both [field anti-ballistic missile systems](#), but a Vanguard submarine missile launch in waters nearby certainly presents a threat neither would be confident facing.

There are also significant non-military benefits the UK derives from its nuclear

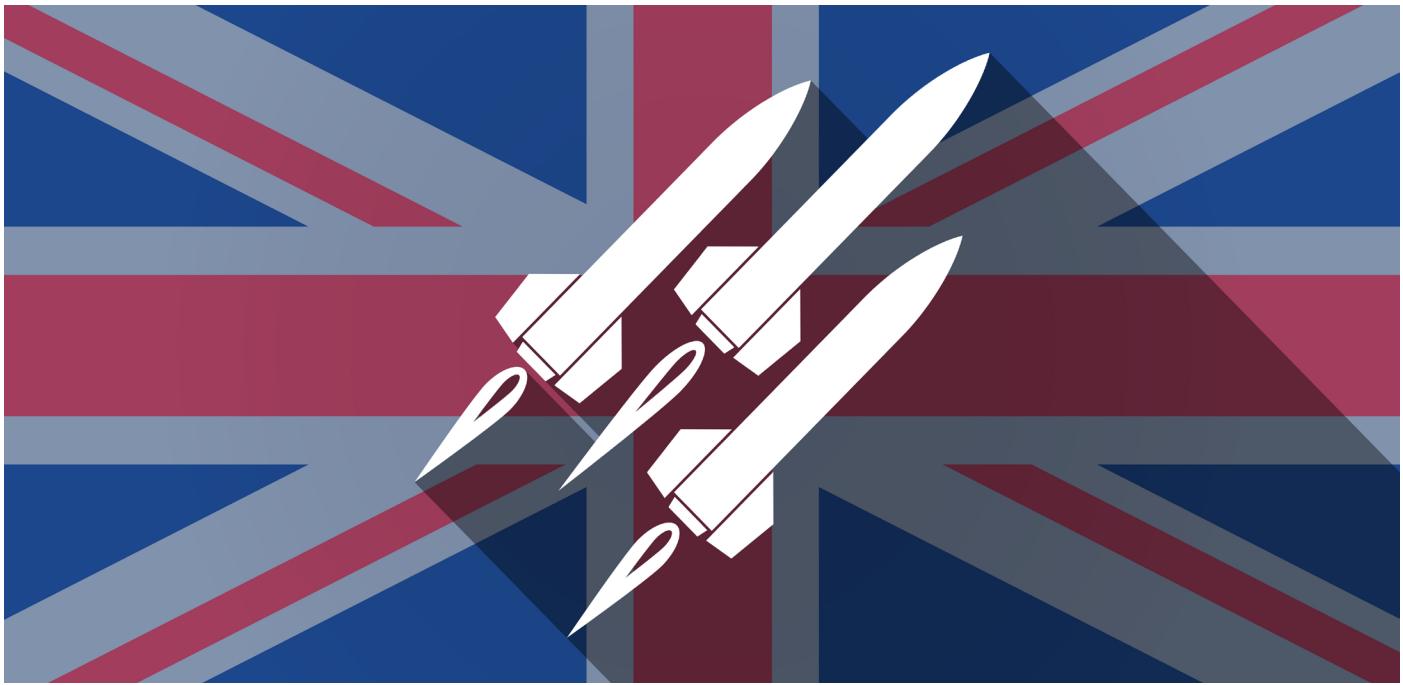
weapons programme. The UK is a founding nuclear member, along with France, China, Russia and the United States. The 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty cemented the UK's status as a nuclear power and also solidified its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Abandoning its current nuclear capability could [amplify calls](#) from the Security Council to grant permanent membership that reflects the changing global political environment. Oft-mentioned candidates are UN members from South America and Africa, none of whom possess nuclear weapons.

History also gets a vote on the matter, and the decades both near and far have been unkind to states willing to give up their nuclear weapons. The current conflict in Ukraine makes plain the peril of relinquishing the nuclear trump card in favour of promises of peace. The Budapest Memorandum has proved short-lived; while accusations were levied against all parties, one could argue that each signatory, except Ukraine, violated its spirit, intent and/or application. It is not a far reach to assume the current situation in Ukraine would not have

materialised if Kyiv had retained its [expansive Soviet-owned nuclear arsenal](#). Kyiv is not alone in its miscalculations. Strongmen in Baghdad and Tripoli abandoned their nuclear weapons programmes, the former by sword and the latter by pen. Nevertheless, both Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi were hunted down and executed by US forces or their proxies. While the world watched the violent end of both dictators, the dynastic rulers in North Korea were paying attention. Without question, the out-sized presence and influence of the Hermit Kingdom on the global stage is owed to its nuclear weapons, first and foremost, and second, its powerful friends. While comparing the geopolitical credentials of North Korea and the UK is folly, the premise remains: give up one's nuclear arsenal and the odds of getting invaded certainly don't decrease.

Another key consideration is the quasi-independence the UK enjoys courtesy of its nuclear weapons programme. There are plenty who lament the [UK's dependency](#) on the US in global affairs; it would be difficult to argue that giving up its nukes would maintain UK geopolitical leverage. Instead, US leverage against the UK would likely increase, which could figure prominently if a candidate with policy views like those of Donald J. Trump wins the next presidential election. Such a chain of events brings to the forefront painful experiences from Serbia and Iraq, in which reluctant acquiescence to the US' strong-armed policies put





the UK in precarious situations that retrospection might have avoided.

Lastly, economics rears its head once again. The UK nuclear programme represents a [considerable cost](#) but pales in comparison with developing a home-grown, sovereign enterprise. Building a new, fully independent nuclear system would be extraordinarily expensive and would no doubt take a very long time. The current arrangement with the US is much more cost-effective but fraught with political intrigue. French or European cooperation could provide an alternative course of action, but [it could also be problematic](#). The UK and France have nuclear cooperation treaties, but reliance on the French or a consortium of European powers merely transfers UK dependency from one known quantity to another. With the French, a change in the political winds could jeopardise the agreement, while relying on a broader European deterrent would complicate matters exponentially. Persuading NATO members to agree to an increase in defence funding is one matter; reaching a consensus on the development and employment of nuclear missiles would likely entail a level of cooperation far beyond even

the most optimistic planners in Brussels.

“Give me a one-handed economist. All my economists say, ‘on the one hand... and then on the other.’” – US President Harry Truman

The nuclear question is an exceedingly difficult one for the UK; all courses of action offer murky advantages riddled with threatening pitfalls and long-term ramifications. Maintain the status quo and Washington's influence remains strong; go it alone to shed American leverage and incur massive costs when conventional forces also need a significant upgrade. All the while, the economy (i.e., the taxpayers) bears little additional capacity to support either, let alone both.

An intriguing hybrid solution might be for the UK to scrap its current nuclear capabilities in favour of an Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system; costs would still be relatively high, but likely much less than building an independent nuclear weapons programme. However, ABMs offer no guarantee of protection from a pre-emptive enemy intercontinental ballistic missile attack and might struggle in the future to keep pace with rapid advancements in that field. Just

one Russian Sarmat can deliver multiple warheads with a total payload of 7.5 megatons, 500 times greater than the 15-kiloton bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Additionally, ABM systems are designed for protection against [accidental or rogue missile launches](#), not as Chinese or Russian strategic deterents.

There is no way forward without risk; such is the nature of geopolitics. Hypothetically, the UK economy could fund both an organic nuclear programme and upgrades to its conventional force, but that is by no means guaranteed, especially in the event of another major economic recession. The Government could choose to eliminate the nuclear weapons programme and devote funds to adapting UK forces to the evolving nature of warfare while also increasing the overall size of the military. That would make more fiscal sense, but wounded pride, diminished prestige and reduced leverage would be painful prices to pay. At the extreme, a non-nuclear armed UK could fuel further calls for a re-evaluation of the UN Security Council, particularly its permanent membership.

The current conundrum puts a more transcendental issue in the spotlight: in the future,

does the UK aspire to remain a global power or adopt a more regional focus? A [Global Britain](#) means power projection with naval and expeditionary forces, as well as heavy ground forces for collective defence within NATO. But with pounds at a premium, upgrading its military and maintaining its nuclear programme, as it is, seals the UK's fate vis-à-vis the US; the former irretrievably cedes leverage to the latter through reliance on it for its nuclear capability. While not an ideal arrangement, it allows for upgrades made more apparent by the war in Ukraine and the retention of its nuclear programme at a substantial discount versus building its own sovereign capability. The Security Defence Review calls explicitly for greater conventional warfighting readiness. Existing labour shortages, capacity strain, insufficient infrastructure and historical project delays will make tackling the conventional or nuclear forces difficult; attempting to do both simultaneously seems like a fool's errand. The arrangement with the US for nuclear weapons and France too for nuclear power, critical given the UK's ageing nuclear reactors, isn't ideal. However, seldom is any course of action in state matters, making UK pragmatism a recurring and valuable theme.