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Bridging the Channel

The UK's nuclear deterrent and its role in European security

By Ian Bond



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This paper is the third of a three paper CER/KAS project, 'Bridging the Channel'. The aim is to assess how EU states and the UK can continue to work together in foreign and security policy after Brexit. The first paper focused on diplomatic co-operation, the second dealt with defence industrial co-operation and this paper focuses on the role of the UK's nuclear deterrent in European security.

- ★ For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the UK plans to increase its nuclear warhead stockpile. The main principles of the UK's nuclear policy have not changed, however. The focus is on deterring nuclear attack. The UK's force will remain the minimum required for deterrence – though the definition of 'minimum' may change in response to the evolving threat. The UK does not exclude the first use of nuclear weapons. And its nuclear weapons are intended to defend its NATO allies as well as itself.
- ★ Not all the UK's allies see its policy as credible. The UK needs to do a better job of explaining how its deterrent fits into the current security picture in Europe.
- ★ Some of the countries that feel most threatened by Russia question the credibility of a nuclear guarantee from the UK, a country that commits few conventional forces to their defence – particularly as UK land forces are set to shrink further. Those countries look primarily to the US and its substantial conventional and nuclear forces in Europe for both defence and deterrence.
- ★ In many parts of Western Europe, and especially in Germany, arms control is seen as more important than deterrence. Anything that highlights the role of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy, such as the UK's announcement of an increase in its nuclear stockpile, is unwelcome in the eyes of governments under domestic pressure to do more for disarmament.
- ★ Meanwhile, the Biden administration's review of US nuclear posture has the UK and other allies nervous. Biden has in the past supported a change in policy to make clear that the sole purpose of US nuclear forces should be to deter and if necessary retaliate against a nuclear attack. Such a policy would imply that an adversary could launch a conventional attack without risking nuclear retaliation.
- ★ Unlike the UK, France does not put its nuclear forces at the disposal of NATO or say explicitly that it would use them to defend its allies. Emmanuel Macron has, however, tried to convince other Europeans that France would show solidarity with them in a crisis, even if they had no role in decisions on the use of French nuclear weapons.
- ★ The UK should leverage its deterrent to strengthen security relations with its European partners:
 - ★ It should ensure that the current difficulties with France over Brexit issues do not contaminate its defence and security relationship with Paris, and recommit itself to bilateral nuclear co-operation. The two countries face similar questions over nuclear policy, and share similar concerns about where Biden might take US nuclear policy.

- ★ It should make sure that the incoming German government understands the contribution the UK has made to nuclear arms control since 1991, as well as the reasoning behind the announced warhead increase.
- ★ It should ensure that Central European and Baltic allies believe in its commitment to use nuclear weapons to deter and if necessary defend them against attacks.

In March 2021, the UK announced that after three decades of reducing its nuclear weapons stockpile, the number of nuclear warheads would begin to increase. The UK also reiterated its long-standing positions that all its nuclear weapons would be committed to NATO – that is, available for use at the request of NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (the alliance’s most senior military commander); and that they would only be used “in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO Allies”.¹ In other words, as during the Cold War, the UK accepts the possibility, however remote, of suffering a nuclear strike on its own territory in retaliation for a British nuclear strike carried out in defence of other countries that do not have their own nuclear weapons.

The UK’s European allies ought to be grateful for the UK’s willingness to bear such risks on their behalf. But it seems that not all of them see this policy as credible. The UK has largely succeeded in keeping its defence relationships with European allies separate from Brexit-related tensions, but there are concerns among NATO partners about future UK intentions towards the continent of Europe. Though UK nuclear forces have been committed to NATO since the early 1960s, there has been little debate in recent years about what that commitment means in concrete terms, either in the UK or in allied countries. That needs to change: the UK needs to show how its deterrent fits into Europe’s changing security

environment, and reassure its allies that its commitment is not just rhetorical.

This paper explores how the UK thinks about its nuclear weapons, both as the ultimate guarantee of its national security and as components in NATO’s deterrent posture; and how European allies see the UK’s nuclear deterrent, including in the context of Britain’s overall commitment to defending NATO territory. It looks at the roles played by the UK and French deterrents. And it makes recommendations for improving UK messaging on nuclear issues.

UK nuclear capabilities

The UK has deployed nuclear weapons since 1956, but since the end of the Cold War it has reduced the number of warheads and the different delivery systems for them. Since giving up its free-fall bombs in 1998, the UK has relied for its deterrent entirely on 58 US-made Trident missiles with UK-made warheads, deployed on four Vanguard-class nuclear submarines, one of which is always at sea (the ‘continuous at-sea deterrent’). The submarines can each carry 16 missiles. They will be replaced from the early 2030s by four Dreadnought-class submarines, capable of carrying 12 missiles each.

Since the end of the Cold War, responding to a perceived reduction in the threat to the UK and its allies, the British government has progressively cut the number of missiles and warheads deployed on each submarine, from 16 missiles and 128 warheads initially to eight missiles and

40 warheads in 2010. It also announced in 2010 that the number of operationally available warheads would be reduced from “less than 160” to “no more than 120” – a total reached by 2015.² At the same time, it said that the total number of warheads in the stockpile would be reduced from not more than 225 to not more than 180 by the mid-2020s.

In March 2021, however, the government announced that the ceiling for the overall stockpile would be raised from 180 (a figure which had in any case not yet been reached) to 260. It cited the security environment, “including the developing range of technological and doctrinal threats” as justifying the increase. It also decided to stop publishing figures for the operational stockpile, deployed missiles and deployed warheads.

1: HM Government, ‘Global Britain in a competitive age: The integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy’, March 2021.

2: HM Government, ‘Securing Britain in an age of uncertainty: The strategic defence and security review’, October 2010.

UK nuclear deterrence policy

Despite the increased warhead ceiling, the main principles of the UK's nuclear policy have not changed since the then Labour government set them out in 2006, as part of the case for procuring new submarines:

- ★ The focus is on preventing nuclear attack. The weapons are not designed for war-fighting.
- ★ The UK will only retain the minimum amount of destructive power needed to achieve its deterrence objectives. The bigger stockpile is said to reflect a changed calculation of the number of warheads needed for that purpose.
- ★ The UK will maintain ambiguity about when, how and at what scale it might use nuclear weapons. In particular, it will not exclude the first use of nuclear weapons.
- ★ Except when (undefined) supreme national interests are at stake, the UK's nuclear weapons will be used exclusively for the defence of NATO.³

“For the Central Europeans, facing growing Russian forces, the US and UK nuclear umbrellas are increasingly relevant.”

Unlike French presidents, each of whom since the 1960s has delivered a set-piece speech on nuclear deterrence, British prime ministers tend to talk about the UK deterrent only when they have to. Policy has, however, been set out in successive defence reviews. Those of 2010, 2015 and 2021 show progressively more emphasis

on the NATO aspect of the UK's deterrence, and on co-operation with France and the US.⁴ This year's integrated review describes nuclear co-operation with the US as “an important part” of the bilateral UK-US relationship; while it reiterates a statement made by British Prime Minister John Major and French President Jacques Chirac in October 1995, that the vital interests of one country could not be threatened without the vital interests of the other equally being at risk.

The UK, unlike the other major nuclear powers including France, relies on only one delivery system for its deterrent. In the Cold War it could have used so-called sub-strategic nuclear weapons (those with a shorter range and/or less explosive power) on advancing forces, to give an adversary a chance to reconsider before risking further escalation, up to an all-out strategic nuclear attack on the adversary's homeland. But the UK abandoned the last of its tactical nuclear weapons in 1998. The integration of UK weapons into NATO's overall nuclear plans makes sense: it enables the UK to show solidarity with its allies, but also to be involved in decisions on the use of sub-strategic nuclear weapons by others, before there is any question of its own strategic deterrent being used. By contrast, France does not commit its nuclear forces to NATO, but has its own sub-strategic nuclear weapons. NATO relies for its sub-strategic nuclear systems on dual-capable aircraft (that is, aircraft able to carry conventional or nuclear bombs) operated by Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey and carrying US nuclear bombs. Despite the changed threat picture, the UK has given no indication that it would want to be part of this arrangement – even though it is equipping its air force with F-35 aircraft, which would give it the option to do so.

What the UK's allies think about nuclear deterrence

When they think about nuclear deterrence, NATO allies focus first on the role of the US; the UK comes a distant second – not surprisingly, given the disparity in the scale of US and UK arsenals. Since the 1974 ‘Ottawa Declaration on Atlantic Relations’, NATO documents have emphasised the importance of the US nuclear guarantee, but have also described UK and French nuclear forces as having a deterrent role of their own and contributing to the overall security of the alliance.

Views on nuclear weapons vary between allies. For the Central Europeans, facing growing and modernised Russian forces and concerned about new Russian nuclear systems, the US and to a lesser extent UK nuclear umbrellas are of increasing relevance. They worried that Donald Trump, with his hostility to NATO, would not order US troops to defend them if they were attacked, let alone put US cities at risk of nuclear attack. But they are not much more reassured by Biden: he has

3: HM Government, ‘The future of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent’, December 2006; Directorate of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Policy – Assistant Director (Deterrence Policy), Ministry of Defence, ‘Your freedom of information request about the UK nuclear deterrent’, National Archives, July 19th 2005 (archived October 26th 2012).

4: HM Government, ‘Securing Britain in an age of uncertainty: The strategic defence and security review’, October 2010; ‘National security and strategic defence and security review 2015: A secure and prosperous United Kingdom’, November 2015; ‘Global Britain in a competitive age: The integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy’, March 2021.

said that his administration will “take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy”, though he has also reiterated US deterrence commitments to its allies.⁵ More than other allies, the Central Europeans welcomed the announcement by the UK of an increase in its warhead ceiling.

Most Western European allies – including those who operate aircraft carrying US nuclear bombs – are more focused on arms control than deterrence, and hope that Biden’s support for further nuclear negotiations with Russia will help them to deal with domestic political opposition to the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe. Some of them face considerable domestic pressure to sign up to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW – which entered into force in January 2021). Norway, Slovenia and the Netherlands

were involved in various stages of the negotiation of the treaty, though none ultimately signed it. The alliance, however, issued a statement in December 2020 stating its opposition to the treaty “as it does not reflect the increasingly challenging international security environment”.⁶ Despite this, the new Labour-led coalition government in Norway has said that it will attend the next conference of parties to the TPNW, while the Belgian coalition government that took office in 2020 is committed to exploring how the treaty “can give new impetus to multilateral nuclear disarmament”.⁷ As NATO works on its new Strategic Concept, due to be adopted at a summit in 2022, these differences among allies which want to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in NATO and those that support a strong nuclear deterrent may come to the fore.

Germans uncertain

Much will turn on the views of the new German government. The Greens, who first became a significant political force through their opposition to the deployment of US nuclear weapons on German soil in the early 1980s, called in their election manifesto for Germany to accede to the TPNW, initially as an observer. The SPD argued that Germany should “constructively support the intentions” of the treaty.⁸ There is a cross-party group of ‘friends of the TPNW’ in the Bundestag, made up predominantly of representatives from the Greens, SPD and the left-wing party die Linke, that supports Germany’s accession, though the majority of Bundestag members would probably prefer to stick with current NATO policy.

“If Germany gave up its NATO nuclear role, Belgium and the Netherlands would probably follow suit.”

The future of nuclear-sharing arrangements may also come into sharper focus as a result of German domestic politics. Germany’s aging dual-capable Tornado aircraft are scheduled to be withdrawn from service around 2025. The outgoing German government wanted to replace them with dual-capable American F/A-18F Super Hornets.

While the SPD and Greens have not categorically ruled out Germany’s continued participation in nuclear sharing, their election platforms implied that they were sceptical. The decision on whether to replace the Tornados, and if so with what, will be a first test of whether they will break with past German policy.

Were Germany to give up its NATO nuclear role, the domestic political pressure on the Belgian and Dutch governments to follow suit would probably be irresistible. Opponents of nuclear weapons would certainly argue that if Germany refused to have anything to do with such armaments, then there would be no reason for Belgium or the Netherlands to continue their involvement in nuclear sharing arrangements. But NATO’s sub-strategic options based in Europe would then be reduced to dual-capable aircraft operated by Italy and Turkey – with the latter being seen as an increasingly erratic ally. Beyond that, NATO would have to rely on American aircraft operating from the US, and French aircraft that are not committed to NATO. London, Paris and Washington all see the narrowing of sub-strategic nuclear options in Europe as reducing the credibility of NATO’s overall deterrent posture and therefore as potentially destabilising; they are keen to avoid any move in that direction if possible.

Front-line allies anxious

Anti-nuclear sentiment in parts of Western Europe is particularly unsettling for the countries most exposed to Russian military pressure. The German Greens’ leadership

accepted in the election campaign that the security and protection of Germany’s eastern neighbours would have to be central to any disarmament effort.⁹ Yet Germany

5: Joseph R Biden, ‘Interim national security strategic guidance’, White House, March 2021.

6: ‘North Atlantic Council statement as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons enters into force’, NATO, December 15th 2020.

7: ‘Belgian government shifts stance on TPNW’, The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), September 30th 2020.

8: Ulrike Franke, ‘Foreign and defence policy in the German election’, European Council on Foreign Relations, September 16th 2021.

9: Helene Bubrowski and Konrad Schuller, ‘Mit Dialog und Härte’ (‘With dialogue and toughness’), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, April 25th 2021.

and other allies would have to spend a lot more on defence in order to be able to deter a large-scale attack with conventional forces alone. NATO's current Enhanced Forward Presence – small multinational forces based in Poland and the Baltic States – is designed to show allied solidarity, not mount a conventional defence against a significant attack.

In theory, Central European allies could take part in nuclear sharing. At present, however, none do, in line with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, in which NATO stated that it had “no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members”, or to establish nuclear weapons storage sites on the territory of new members, including adapting nuclear weapons storage facilities left behind by the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Some Central European states might like to change the situation, however, in the light of Russia's breaches of the Founding Act commitment to respect the territorial integrity of other states.

“Some Central Europeans worry that the British ‘tripwire’ will not be connected to substantial reinforcements.”

The Polish government's 2020 national security strategy says that Poland will “participate actively in shaping the policy of nuclear deterrence of NATO”, and in 2015 then Deputy Defence Minister Tomasz Szatkowski (now Poland's ambassador to NATO) said in relation to Polish participation in nuclear sharing that “concrete steps are under consideration”, though the defence ministry subsequently rowed back from his remarks.¹¹ There have also been occasional rumours, firmly denied by all parties, that US nuclear weapons might be moved from Turkey to Romania as a result of Ankara's tense relations with Washington. Given the desire of many Western European allies not to provoke Russia, however, it is very unlikely that there will ever be a consensus in NATO on including Poland or other Central European states like Romania in nuclear-sharing arrangements.

The countries who feel most vulnerable to military threats from Russia are therefore dependent on the extended nuclear deterrence offered by their allies. To what extent do they see a specific role for the UK deterrent? According to experts in the region, discussions on deterrence in Central Europe overwhelmingly focus on the role of the US. Washington provides conventional forces large enough to deter a conventional attack. Beyond that, it would offer a nuclear ‘backstop’ in case Russia seized

territory quickly and then threatened to use, or used, nuclear weapons if NATO counter-attacked. The UK is seen as very much a second-best option for deterring a Russian attack, and (like France) possibly unreliable, particularly if Russia can avoid engaging the 900 British troops stationed in Estonia and the 150 in Poland. In interviews with more than 20 Estonian and Latvian policy makers and military leaders, conducted in 2018, “none of the interviewees expressed a belief that either the UK or France will provide believable nuclear deterrence against Russia, should the Baltic countries need it”¹²

There seem to be a couple of reasons for the Central Europeans not fully believing in the UK deterrent. The first is that prior to the integrated review, UK defence reviews since the Cold War had stressed the UK's contribution to global efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons rather than the continuing role of its deterrent: it was reducing its nuclear stockpile, the number of warheads and missiles deployed and their level of readiness. The 2021 language goes further than its predecessors in stressing the UK deterrent's role in safeguarding the security of the whole alliance and in tackling growing and diversifying nuclear threats. It may take some time, however, for allies to adjust to the integrated review's new emphasis on nuclear weapons as part of the UK's contribution to NATO.

The second reason for Central and Eastern Europeans' doubts about the credibility of the UK deterrent will be harder to deal with, however. That is the belief that the UK is no longer fully committed to the defence of Europe, as shown both by the low priority given to land forces in the Defence Command Paper that accompanied the integrated review, and by the ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’ – the UK's plans to increase its military presence east of Suez.

Front-line allies believe in the US nuclear deterrent because they see it as linked to the 64,000 US forces deployed in Europe. The small number of British troops stationed in Central Europe and the Baltic region undermines the credibility of the UK deterrent in their eyes. UK forces deployed in Poland and Estonia are welcome in the context of NATO's effort to show its commitment to defend the territory of all allies. But some in the region worry that the British ‘tripwire’ will not turn out to be connected to any substantial follow-on forces. Recent speculation that the UK will not be able to provide a promised brigade (5,000-6,000 troops) to NATO in 2024 for lack of equipment will not reassure its nervous allies.¹³ As a report by the leading Estonian think-tank said: “Cutting British armoured formations needed for collective defence ... raises the question among front-line states whether the UK will be more capable of

10: ‘Founding Act on mutual relations, co-operation and security between NATO and the Russian Federation’, NATO, May 27th 1997.

11: Katarzyna Kubiak, ‘Playing Warsaw against Berlin on nuclear weapons’, European Leadership Network, June 1st 2020.

12: Viljar Veebel, ‘(Un)justified expectations on nuclear deterrence of non-nuclear NATO members: the case of Estonia and Latvia?’, *Defence and Security Analysis*, August 1st 2018.

13: ‘British Army close to being ‘combat incapable’ against high-end threats’, Forces Network website, October 11th 2021.

reinforcing them”¹⁴ The worry among Central Europeans is that the UK would not be able to contribute much to a conventional defence effort; and that it might then leave its allies to their fate, and use its nuclear weapons solely

in order to deter an attack on the UK itself. This concern persists, despite the UK’s public statements on the role of its nuclear forces in defending NATO allies.

US wavering

Complicating the debate on NATO’s future nuclear strategy is the parallel debate in the US on its national nuclear posture review. The last review was published in 2018, under Donald Trump, and it made more explicit than the Obama administration’s 2010 review that the US might use nuclear weapons first in a conflict, in extreme circumstances which “could include significant non-nuclear strategic attacks”¹⁵ Indeed, the review firmly rejected a shift to a ‘no first use’ policy.

The Biden administration is now engaged in its own nuclear posture review, due to be completed in 2022. When he was running for office, Biden argued that “the sole purpose of the US nuclear arsenal should be deterring – and, if necessary, retaliating against – a

nuclear attack” – a policy that the Obama administration said conditions did not allow it to adopt in 2010.¹⁶ While such a policy would fall short of a full commitment never to use nuclear weapons first, sought by some arms control advocates, it would imply that an adversary could launch a conventional attack with a high degree of confidence that the US would not respond with nuclear weapons. That might win Biden plaudits with the incoming German coalition and in some other Western European countries, but it would add to a perception in Poland and other parts of Central Europe that the US is disarming itself. America’s allies in Europe and Asia – including the UK and France – are reportedly lobbying against any change in US policy.¹⁷

France outside peering in

France has around 290 nuclear warheads. About 50 are mounted on air-launched cruise missiles and are described by France as ‘pre-strategic’ weapons – intended to deliver a final warning. The other warheads in the operational stockpile are on long-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles. France has never committed its nuclear forces to NATO. It chose not to re-join the Nuclear Planning Group – the forum in which the other allies discuss nuclear issues – when it re-joined other parts of the NATO military command structure and defence planning process in 2009. Consequently, it finds itself outside most NATO discussions on nuclear issues (including any relating to the US review). Emmanuel Macron’s February 2020 speech on France’s nuclear deterrent hinted at concern that the US and Russia might make arms control agreements affecting the security of Europe without the European nuclear powers being at the table.¹⁸ There is, however, a significant level of bilateral and trilateral consultation with the UK and US, and France will be involved in negotiations on NATO nuclear policy in the new Strategic Concept.

Because the French deterrent is not integrated into NATO’s nuclear posture, the most vulnerable states worry

that France would not use it to defend them. Macron, however, tried to use his speech to convince other Europeans that their vital interests are also France’s, even though French weapons are not committed to NATO. He argued that French weapons “strengthen the security of Europe through their very existence and they have, in this sense, a truly European dimension”, and that despite France’s decision-making process being independent, it was fully compatible with “our unwavering solidarity with our European partners”. He proposed a strategic dialogue with those European countries that were ready for it on the role played by France’s nuclear deterrence in Europe’s collective security, and suggested that European countries could, if they wished, be “associated” with French nuclear exercises. The message does not seem to have been received in Central Europe, however: because of broader doubts over French advocacy of European strategic autonomy and Macron’s attempts to improve relations with Russia (which he reiterated in the speech) Central European governments see no reason to supplement a US nuclear guarantee with a French one.¹⁹ For different reasons, therefore, neither the French nor the British deterrent are highly valued in Central and Eastern Europe.

14: Martin Hurt, ‘The UK’s integrated review is not reassuring from a Baltic perspective’, International Centre for Defence and Security (Estonia), March 29th 2021.

15: “Nuclear posture review”, Office of the US Secretary of Defense, February 2018.

16: Joseph Biden, ‘Why America must lead again: Rescuing US foreign policy after Trump’, Foreign Affairs, March/April 2020.

17: Demetri Sevastopulo and Henry Foy, ‘Allies lobby Biden to prevent shift to ‘no first use’ of nuclear arms’, *Financial Times*, October 30th 2021.

18: Emmanuel Macron, ‘Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron sur la stratégie de défense et de dissuasion devant les stagiaires de la 27ème promotion de l’Ecole de Guerre’, Elysée, February 7th 2020.

19: Sophia Besch and Luigi Scazzieri, ‘European strategic autonomy and a new transatlantic bargain’, CER policy brief, December 11th 2020; Sophia Besch and Luigi Scazzieri, ‘After Afghanistan and AUKUS: What next for European defence?’, CER insight, October 7th 2021.

In the NATO Strategic Concept, the outcome of allies' divergent views may well be a restatement of the alliance's long-standing 'dual-track' policy: maintaining the nuclear capability to deter potential adversaries, but also pursuing dialogue and arms control. The UK should be comfortable with such a policy: in the integrated review,

the government said that it remained committed to the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and supported effective arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation measures "taking into account the prevailing security environment" – phrasing that allowed room for the planned increase in its nuclear stockpile.

Fitting the UK deterrent into the European security jigsaw

The UK has allowed discussion of the nuclear section of the integrated review to focus almost entirely on the increase in its warhead stockpile. But it has the opportunity to leverage its deterrent to reinforce security ties with its European partners, provided it can get the messaging right.

“Even with the increases in warhead numbers, the UK has a good story to tell about previous reductions.”

★ Its starting point should be to recommit itself to nuclear co-operation with France. This may not be politically easy. Even though defence relations have been less affected than areas such as co-operation in countering irregular migration, UK-France bilateral relations are strained over a number of issues, including Brexit. Still, the two need to find a way past their differences. When it comes to the future role of nuclear weapons in ensuring European security, they have much more in common than divides them. As a result of the 2010 Lancaster House treaties, they share some nuclear weapons research facilities. Despite the fact that UK nuclear forces are committed to NATO and French forces are not, if deterrence in Europe failed and a major conflict broke out, London and Paris would face similar decisions about when and how to use their weapons. They should work together to try to ensure that the US nuclear posture review reiterates the possibility that a nuclear response could be triggered by a non-nuclear attack. If Biden insists on ruling that out, London and Paris should find common language setting out the role of their nuclear weapons in deterring any significant attack, not just a nuclear attack.

★ The UK is unlikely to be able to reverse anti-nuclear sentiment in Germany (or other Western European countries), but it should use its foreign policy dialogue with Berlin, launched in June 2021, to brief the incoming German government on both the disarmament and deterrence aspects of UK policy.²⁰ Even with the planned increases in its warhead stockpile, it has a good story to

tell about the reductions it has previously made. London can now point to technological developments in China and Russia, and the rapid growth of China's strategic nuclear forces, to explain why it has had to reverse some reductions. The UK should also work with France and the US to persuade nervous allies not to give in to public pressure to accede to the TPNW or give up their role in nuclear-sharing arrangements.

★ The UK needs to ensure that its commitment to use its nuclear weapons to deter and if necessary respond to attacks on its allies is understood and believed by those most exposed to Russian pressure. This is partly a matter of regularly putting it into speaking notes for high-level contacts with Central and Eastern European foreign and defence ministries, and partly a matter of outreach to the small number of experts who follow nuclear issues in the region, to allay their concerns about the UK's commitment.

One issue, however, is not just a matter of messaging: the UK has to address the disconnect between its diminishing contribution to the conventional defence of allied territory, and its increasing stress on its nuclear commitment to NATO. Estonians and others can be forgiven for thinking that if the UK is only prepared to deploy 900 troops to protect Tallinn from Russian forces many times that size, then it may not really be willing to contemplate nuclear war in defence of its small ally.

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20: 'UK-Germany joint declaration, June 2021', Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, June 30th 2021.