



Deterrence: Integrating Britain's conventional and nuclear forces

By Matthew Palmer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The organisational and cultural structures of the United Kingdom's (UK) defence architecture arbitrarily separate nuclear and conventional forces into silos. This limits the ability of British decision-makers to generate greater synergies between nuclear and conventional deterrence.
- This siloing is made even more challenging due to hollowed-out conventional forces and a minimalist nuclear deterrence posture. This combination of factors undermines the UK's ability to deter adversaries.
- Options to help rebuild deeper synergies between conventional and nuclear forces include integrating nuclear and conventional planning; reconstituting strike and denial capabilities; and deepening interoperability with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies, especially in Europe.



The fundamental purpose of the British Armed Forces, nuclear and conventional, is to deter war. Failing that, they are to win wars without conflict escalating to nuclear destruction. The best way to do so is to signal effectively to adversaries that opening hostilities is not worth the risk.

Against hostile nuclear powers, a strong, credible deterrent including both nuclear and conventional forces is required. As such, greater synergy between the United Kingdom's (UK) nuclear and conventional forces should be developed by His Majesty's (HM) Government to facilitate more effective deterrence against state threats in the so-called 'Third Nuclear Age'.¹

The 'immediate and pressing' threat to Britain that demands both conventional and nuclear deterrence is the Russian Federation.² Although many of the proposals described are holistic and not solely applicable to Russia, this Primer focuses on the Russian threat as the primary baseline for analysis. It begins by setting out the problems facing the UK's ability to deter – most notably hollowed-out conventional forces, and organisational and cultural structures that arbitrarily separate nuclear and conventional forces into silos. Building on this, it offers key policy recommendations of breaking down these silos, reconstituting strike and denial options, and deepening interoperability with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies on nuclear and conventional deterrence strategy, while more broadly calling for a proactive approach to deterring Britain's adversaries rather than a reactive one.

Deterrence: Theory and posture

The UK Defence Doctrine, following NATO terminology, defines deterrence as 'the convincing of a potential aggressor that the consequences of coercion or armed conflict would outweigh the potential gains'.³ Deterrence is generally categorised as either by 'denial' – deterring an action by making it 'infeasible or unlikely to succeed' – or 'punishment' – threatening 'severe penalties...if an attack occurs'.⁴ In the British context, the distinction between 'direct deterrence' – aimed at preventing attacks on a state's sovereign territory – and 'extended deterrence' – aimed at discouraging attacks on third parties, such as allies – is also relevant, noting that the UK publicly assigns its nuclear and conventional forces to NATO.⁵

¹ See: Joy Mitra, *Conventional Military Strategy in the Third Nuclear Age* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2023).

² See: 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain safer: Secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

³ 'UK Defence Doctrine (JDP 0-01)', Ministry of Defence, 21/11/2022, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

⁴ See: 'Deterrence in the 21st Century', Ministry of Defence: Written evidence, 20/11/2013, <https://publications.parliament.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

⁵ James Tobin, 'Deterrence as part of the UK's defence policy', House of Lords Library, 25/10/2024, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

Finally, the concept of ‘compellence’ – the ability to coerce a state through force, threat of force, or the withdrawal of military support – should be considered. While rarely discussed openly in British policy, compellence is a key advantage of strong conventional forces, and one that is vital in crises and wartime.

As HM Government asserts, ‘the foundation of the UK’s approach to deterrence remains a minimum, credible, independent UK nuclear deterrent, assigned to the defence of NATO’.⁶ This nuclear deterrent is ‘operationally independent’, and ‘the UK is deliberately ambiguous about precisely when, how, and at what scale it would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons’.⁷

The British nuclear deterrent itself currently consists of four Vanguard class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), capable of firing the American Trident II D-5 ballistic missile armed with the British Mark 4 (Holbrook) warhead. There is always one SSBN on patrol under Operation RELENTLESS, providing the UK’s Continuous At-Sea Deterrent (CASD).

From the 2030s, Britain’s nuclear deterrent will be updated. The Vanguard class SSBNs will be replaced by the Dreadnought class, and the Mark 4 will be replaced by the Astraea A21. In addition, while the UK has no ‘sub-strategic’ nuclear weapons, it has announced that it will join the NATO Nuclear Sharing Mission with the procurement of the F-35A Lightning II Joint Combat Aircraft, which is able to carry an American nuclear bomb.⁸

Institutional bifurcation: The policy disconnect

While British strategy and policy does note linkages between nuclear and conventional deterrence – especially when related to the threat from hostile states – in practice, the two are viewed separately. At the highest level, this can be seen in the fact that there are three separate committees within the National Security Council for general security, ‘nuclear’, and ‘resilience’.⁹

Within the Ministry of Defence (MOD), nuclear matters are the domain of a small group of specialists, predominantly within the Royal Navy and Defence Nuclear Organisation, and nuclear strategy and wargames are highly classified, usually to Above Secret. Outside these fora, there are few in the MOD or wider Civil Service who understand or consider nuclear matters on a regular basis.

⁶ ‘The UK’s nuclear deterrent: The National Endeavour explained’, Ministry of Defence, 06/10/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ ‘UK to purchase F-35As and join NATO nuclear mission as Government steps up national security and delivers defence dividend’, 10 Downing Street, 24/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

⁹ ‘List of Cabinet Committees and their membership’, Cabinet Office, 19/11/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).



The separation between conventional and nuclear deterrence continues through policy documents. For instance, although it admits to the ‘blurring between conventional strategic and nuclear capabilities’ and the need to ‘think in several dimensions’, the UK Defence Doctrine does not actually detail any practical action to do so.¹⁰ Similarly, the National Security Strategy of June 2025 notes the growing salience of nuclear weapons in adversaries’ doctrines, but offers no clear policy response beyond continued nuclear investment.¹¹

These structural silos, both within government and policy, limit the development of a strategic culture that considers nuclear weapons alongside conventional force, rather than as a separate entity. In particular, it may also lead Britain to miss opportunities for measured nuclear signalling as part of overall strategic communication. This is worsened by the risk aversion prevalent throughout HM Government, and especially the MOD.¹²

This situation is quite different from the strategic culture of the UK’s allies, most notably the United States (US) and France, and its adversaries.¹³ Russian strategic culture, for example, sees nuclear and conventional weapons as far more intertwined, and the escalation between the two as horizontal and holistic rather than linear and vertical, in contrast to British strategic thought.¹⁴ As such, there is a distinct danger that the UK and its allies misunderstand the actions of rivals such as Russia (and vice versa), will have fewer options to influence them, and will come off worse as a result.¹⁵

Operational realities: The Submarine Service

The closest connection between nuclear and conventional forces is the Royal Navy Submarine Service (RNSS). The RNSS not only crews the Vanguard class boats of the deterrent, but also the Astute class attack submarine: one of its primary conventional defensive measures and, arguably, the UK’s most effective conventional striking force.

The Astute class is one of the few available British platforms that can strike at long range with conventional cruise missiles – the Tomahawk – as well as providing the UK’s primary ‘counter force’ option for hunting Russian SSBNs.

¹⁰ ‘UK Defence Doctrine (JDP 0-01)’, Ministry of Defence, 21/11/2022, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

¹¹ ‘National Security Strategy 2025: Security for the British People in a Dangerous World’, Cabinet Office, 24/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

¹² Matthew Palmer, ‘The British Military Has A Risk Management Problem’, Royal United Services Institute, 13/06/2025, <https://www.rusi.org/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

¹³ See: ‘National Security Strategy 2025: Security for the British People in a Dangerous World’, Cabinet Office, 24/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

¹⁴ Beatrice Aubert et al., ‘Understanding Russian strategic culture and the low-yield nuclear threat’, RAND, 17/08/2025, <https://www.rand.org/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

¹⁵ For an in-depth analysis of changing Russian thought, see: Dmitry Adamsky, ‘Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence? Strategic Culture and Coercion Innovations’, *International Security*, 49:3 (2025).

Furthermore, the vast majority of knowledge of practical, operational synergy between nuclear and conventional forces resides almost entirely within the RNSS. However, it suffers from shortages of personnel and available submarines, leading to longer and riskier deployments that damage personnel retention and equipment availability.¹⁶

The challenges within the RNSS highlight how structural issues within British conventional forces impact nuclear security. The UK's conventional forces – especially submarines, but also frigates and aircraft – are often tasked to provide protection for CASD. However, carrying out this important role restricts the ability of conventional forces to carry out other missions.

Britain currently has five of the planned seven Astute class submarines in service, and of those – assuming structural difficulties are resolved – only a maximum of three are available for sea service at any one time. As such, in a crisis scenario, the UK's ability to conduct conventional submarine operations would be curtailed by the need to protect CASD. This stretching of the fleet will be further complicated by the planned rotational deployment of an Astute boat to Australia through the AUKUS trilateral partnership, starting in 2027.¹⁷

The capability gap: Risk of escalation

It is not just structural weaknesses within the RNSS that should be of concern. Across the British Armed Forces, conventional forces are hollowed out, which affects not just conventional but also nuclear deterrence. The lack of conventional forces leaves the UK with few independent sovereign options other than rapid escalation to the threat – or actual usage – of strategic nuclear weapons, which in almost all scenarios would be a disproportionate, apocalyptic, and likely suicidal response. By contrast, Russia enjoys a breadth of non-nuclear weaponry with which it can deter or coerce Britain and its allies, including conventional and non-conventional missiles, chemical weaponry, and sub-strategic nuclear weapons.

To make matters worse, nuclear and conventional forces are seen as almost adversarial in budgetary terms. Absent higher investment in defence, more money spent on nuclear weapons is less money spent on conventional arms. This trade-off has grown more stark as successive governments have underinvested in defence and the legacy of years of cuts to conventional forces have become painfully apparent, just as nuclear costs have increased: the planned cost of the Defence Nuclear Enterprise (DNE) for 2025–2026 was estimated at around 18.7% of total

¹⁶ 'Is the Royal Navy at breaking point or a turning point?', *Navy Lookout*, 11/08/2025, <https://www.navylookout.com/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

¹⁷ 'Submarine Rotational Force – West', Australian Submarine Agency, 07/08/2025, <https://www.asa.gov.au/> (checked: 11/03/2026).



MOD expenditure.¹⁸ More notably, DNE costs are expected to make up around 38% of total capital investment.¹⁹ Considering that the UK's defence policy is, fundamentally, seen as an exercise in cost limitation by many within HM Government, this is not a helpful situation for improving strategic synergy.

Britain's cyber capabilities are sometimes offered as a strategic strike option that spans the gap between conventional and nuclear deterrence through punishment. While the UK is widely regarded to have capable cyber forces, the effectiveness of cyber weapons as a deterrent and punishment tool is debated.²⁰ While certain historic cases have had devastating effects, the impact of cyber weapons has been limited in many examples. Furthermore, cyber weapons generally take time to prepare, and are highly discriminate and tailored. This mitigates their usefulness as both a deterrent and compellent through punishment, especially considering that both require the threat of repeated attacks to be credible.

This leaves a major gap in British sovereign capabilities – one that is also lacking from many European NATO arsenals.²¹ The UK has few options for proportionally responding to and deterring Russian attacks on the British homeland or those of its allies, whether through 'sub-threshold' threats or direct kinetic strikes in times of war.

Strategic proposals

HM Government disconnects nuclear from conventional strategy; a problem reinforced by departmental silos. This, combined with hollowed-out conventional forces, degrades the UK's ability to deter by denial. Consequently, Britain is forced to lower its own nuclear threshold, as it possesses few credible punishment options other than a strategic nuclear strike. Proposed solutions for the UK are as follows:

1. Integrate nuclear and conventional planning;
2. Reconstitute strike and denial capabilities; and
3. Deepen interoperability with NATO allies, especially in Europe.

¹⁸ DNE spending also includes money being spent on conventionally armed, but nuclear-powered submarines, such as the Astute and planned SSN-AUKUS classes.

¹⁹ 'Ministry of Defence annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025', Ministry of Defence, 04/11/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

²⁰ Matthew Calabria, 'Offensive Cyber Attacks and Conventional Warfare', *Survival*, 67:4 (2025).

²¹ See: 'The Military Balance 2025', International Institute for Strategic Studies, 03/02/2025, <https://www.iiss.org/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

Integrate nuclear and conventional planning

HM Government, and especially the MOD, should broaden awareness of deterrence throughout strategic circles, and also support the development of individuals with key expertise in the issue.

Within the MOD, this can be achieved by introducing more wargames and courses involving a significant nuclear element, especially at the defence colleges and for joint courses such as the Advanced Command and Staff Course. While various dimensions may have to be conducted at a highly classified level, many principles can be explored at Official or Official Sensitive classification, and will allow for broader understanding and awareness of nuclear issues – especially if conducted alongside partners in academia, industry, and internationally. This will assist in establishing guidelines for appropriate responses to a wide array of crisis scenarios, as well as exploring how nuclear deterrence might be impacted by emerging technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum computing, and hypersonic missiles.

As part of the broadening of nuclear education, there is a need to look beyond classic Cold War history and study non-Western precedents – particularly India and Pakistan. The India-Pakistan conflicts since 1998 remain the only examples of two nuclear-armed powers engaging in conventional warfare with each other.

The MOD should also ensure that it has a dedicated cadre of trained deterrence specialists who can be posted to various decision-making bodies. This might be generated through internal courses (there is no official training or education course on deterrence within defence) or greater collaboration with outside academia, including through the Nuclear Deterrence Fund.²² Key organisations within the MOD, such as Military Strategic Effects and the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ), should have dedicated deterrence specialists permanently attached to ensure that deterrence, especially nuclear deterrence, is considered in the strategic effects cycle and planning. At a wider level, HM Government should ensure that such specialists are also available within the Cabinet Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO).

Of course, any decision regarding nuclear weapons is the prerogative of the Prime Minister, not military officers or civil servants. However, developing a culture that understands the synergies between conventional and nuclear deterrence at lower levels will ensure more unified advice being presented to policymakers. Furthermore, commanders will have a better perspective on how their actions might impact higher-level decision-making on deterrence, both within home and international governments. Finally, having separate committees within the National Security Council (NSC) for general security, nuclear security, and resilience is unhelpful for joined-up thinking – all should be merged into a single NSC.

²² 'Nuclear Deterrence Fund', Ministry of Defence, 04/09/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

Reconstitute strike and denial capabilities

To improve both broader deterrence and nuclear-conventional synergy, the UK should rebuild its conventional forces as a matter of urgency. This includes both frontline military forces and their supporting arms, as well as weapons that can be used for strategic conventional strikes. The former is important to ensure that Britain does not lose conventional forces so quickly that its only serious response to battlefield losses is strategic nuclear escalation, and also strengthens deterrence by denial. The latter ensures that there is a ‘bridging’ function between frontline forces and strategic nuclear weapons, and that HM Government has further options for deterrence through punishment other than strategic nuclear weapons.

The UK has started to make some headway in this second region, including new cruise missiles from Projects BRAKESTOP and STRATUS.²³ However, as currently planned, these weapons are still primarily designed for tactical situations, with expected ranges of around 500 kilometres (km). Britain and most European allies operate relatively small arsenals of long-ranged conventional weapons (such as Tomahawk cruise missiles in the UK’s case), and nowhere near the breadth and depth of conventional strike weaponry deployed by Russia, or now Ukraine. An advantage of such conventional strike weapons is that they can be used for both deterrence *and* compellence through punishment; they are flexible, and the intensity of weapon usage can be increased or decreased as required, allowing Britain to ‘inflict costs continuously...until compliance is achieved’.²⁴

In comparison, nuclear weapons are far less flexible as a deterrent option both before and during crisis scenarios. As such, the UK’s participation in the joint European Long-Range Strike Approach cruise missile, with a planned range of over 1,000km, is welcome, as is continued British research into hypersonic missiles (including in partnership with the US and Australia via AUKUS Pillar II).²⁵ However, many of these weapons are likely years away from fielding on current timelines, and significant effort should be made to acquire suitable weaponry as soon as possible.

There are also a number of strike weapons in service with the UK’s allies which are compatible with British platforms. For example, HM Government could collaborate (e.g., on co-development and co-production) with the US on the Precision Strike Missile, which is compatible with the British Army’s M270 launchers.

²³ See: ‘712835450 – Project BRAKESTOP’, Ministry of Defence, 25/09/2024, <https://www.find-tender.service.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026), and ‘MBDA unveils STRATUS for future cruise and anti-ship capabilities’, MBDA, 10/09/2025, <https://www.mbda-systems.com/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

²⁴ James Wirtz, ‘How Does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence?’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 12:4 (2018).

²⁵ William Freer, ‘Britain’s hypersonic challenge: Strategic opportunities and risks’, Council on Geostrategy, 10/09/2024, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

There has been discussion over whether Britain should regain a sovereign sub-strategic nuclear weapon, relinquished since 1998.²⁶ Direct involvement in the NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements by the UK can be seen as an initial stepping stone in regaining operational experience of such sub-strategic nuclear weapons, albeit in a context controlled by the US. However, starting a sovereign British one will likely be hugely expensive and time-consuming, and would draw resources from the UK's current nuclear programmes, which are struggling to remain on budget and delivered on time.²⁷ Even with US assistance, the replacement warhead for Trident has already had £15 billion earmarked until 2029.²⁸ While there are strategic benefits of obtaining sovereign sub-strategic nuclear weapons, the overwhelming priority for Britain is conventional rearmament until greater financial resources are made available.

As well as greater offensive capability, the UK should also improve 'deterrence by denial' by hardening the defences of the home islands. An example scenario might be a surprise Russian attack – for example, via submarine-launched cruise missile, or an infiltrated chemical or radiological weapon – that damages Parliament or the PJHQ. Such a direct attack would politically necessitate a decisive response that the UK cannot currently meet other than by escalating to strategic nuclear weapons.

In comparison, being able to intercept and defeat Russian attacks offers HM Government more flexibility in escalatory responses. As such, it is critical that the British homeland is better protected to avoid rapid nuclear escalation. Much stronger air defence forces, including anti-ballistic missile defences, are a necessity, as are broader resilience efforts to protect life and the continuity of government.

Deepen interoperability with European NATO allies

Finally, greater collaboration with allies is required. Sustained participation in NATO nuclear planning and exercises should be continued, and, following the modernised Lancaster House 2.0 Declaration, so should strong collaboration with France.²⁹ In particular, Britain should continue to deepen its participation in the annual French 'Poker' exercise, which offers a rare opportunity to engage in a conventional/tactical nuclear exercise outside a US-led NATO context.

HM Government should also formally start to discuss deterrence and compellence with European allies. Firstly, if planned and coordinated well, allied conventional capability can reduce the sovereign burden on the UK, although allied

²⁶ Patrick Triglavcanin, 'How could the UK augment its nuclear forces?', *Britain's World*, 28/03/2024, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

²⁷ 'Ministry of Defence 2024-25', National Audit Office, 16/12/2025, <https://www.nao.org.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

²⁸ See: 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain safer: Secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

²⁹ 'New UK-France Nuclear Steering Group Meets to Advance Cooperation Under Northwood Declaration', Cabinet Office, 18/12/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).



weaponry should not be accepted as a substitute for a capable British arsenal – especially as the UK needs to provide greater leadership as a key European NATO power.

Secondly, European nations are considering the need for greater nuclear deterrent options that are independent of the US. Britain could assume a decisive leadership role by offering to develop its nuclear capability further in return for allied contributions. This would be one path to creating a sub-strategic nuclear weapon as part of a European programme without inhibiting conventional rearmament.³⁰

These proposals can be achieved through NATO, but also minilateral arrangements, including the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF); the European Three (E3), comprising the UK, France, and Germany; or the European Five (E5) – the E3 alongside Italy and Poland. The E5 and the JEF offer particularly promising options: the former due to the massive increases in defence spending from Germany and Poland, and the latter because of the extremely close ties and like-minded strategic outlook of the JEF nations, already joined in a formal military structure outside NATO.

Conclusion

If Britain is to deter adversaries, and defend itself and its allies effectively, it must generate far greater synergy between its nuclear and conventional forces. This will require significant investment in armaments and structural capacity, but perhaps most importantly a cultural and intellectual shift.

HM Government can no longer afford an inherently risk-averse, passive, and reactionary policy towards hostile state activity. Instead, to shape the international environment in its favour, the UK's policymakers should be culturally prepared for decisive and proactive action, making use of all available assets – including strategic conventional and nuclear signalling if required. Furthermore, by coordinating effectively with continental allies, Britain can provide credible leadership as a key pillar of broader European deterrence efforts as the US turns its focus towards the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific.

To ensure Russia and other adversaries are deterred through fear of British and European capability and resolve, it is time to act decisively, and to conduct effective strategic signalling with all means at the nation's disposal.

³⁰ See: James Rogers and Marc De Vore, 'The case for a British sub-strategic nuclear deterrent', *Britain's World*, 07/04/2025, <https://www.britainworld.org.uk/> (checked: 11/03/2026).

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