

Britain risks having few options short of nuclear escalation, new paper warns

- **Structural separation between nuclear and conventional policy weakens Britain's deterrence posture.**
- **Hollowed-out conventional forces risk leaving the UK with limited options between absorbing an attack and threatening nuclear escalation.**
- **New Primer calls for integrated planning, renewed strike capabilities, and deeper NATO cooperation.**

The Council on Geostrategy has today published a new Primer, entitled 'Deterrence: How Britain can generate greater synergies between its nuclear and conventional forces', by Matthew Palmer, Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy. The analysis examines how the UK can strengthen deterrence in what analysts describe as a 'Third Nuclear Age', arguing that closer integration between nuclear and conventional capabilities will be essential if Britain is to deter hostile states effectively.

The Primer warns that weaknesses in Britain's conventional forces risk leaving policymakers with few credible responses to aggression short of threatening strategic nuclear escalation. While the United Kingdom (UK) maintains a nuclear Continuous At-Sea Deterrent (CASD), effective deterrence increasingly depends on a broader range of conventional capabilities able to deny adversaries success, shape escalation, and signal resolve during crises.

The analysis notes that Britain's deterrence posture is primarily oriented towards countering the threat posed by Russia, particularly given the Kremlin's integration of conventional and nuclear capabilities within its military doctrine. In this context, the UK's ability to coordinate conventional and nuclear strategy becomes increasingly important to sustaining credible deterrence.

A key problem identified in the paper is the institutional separation of nuclear and conventional policy across government and defence. Nuclear strategy remains concentrated within a small specialist community, while wider defence planning rarely incorporates nuclear considerations. This division risks limiting strategic flexibility and weakening Britain's ability to conduct coherent deterrence signalling in crises.

Operational pressures further complicate the picture. The Royal Navy Submarine Service carries much of the practical link between nuclear and conventional deterrence, operating both Vanguard class ballistic missile submarines and Astute

class attack submarines. Personnel shortages and limited submarine availability mean protecting the nuclear deterrent can constrain conventional forces' ability to conduct wider missions.

More broadly, the Primer argues that Britain lacks sufficient 'bridging' capabilities between its conventional and nuclear forces. Long-range conventional strike systems, missile forces, and stronger homeland air defences would give policymakers greater flexibility in responding to aggression without immediate nuclear escalation. Without such capabilities, the UK risks narrowing its range of credible responses in a crisis.

To address these challenges, the paper outlines three priorities: integrating nuclear and conventional planning across government and defence institutions; rebuilding strike and denial capabilities that strengthen deterrence below the nuclear threshold; and deepening cooperation with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO allies) and European partners to reinforce collective deterrence.

In the Primer, Matthew Palmer writes:

'The UK has few options for proportionally responding to and deterring Russian attacks on the British homeland or those of its allies...other than rapid escalation to the threat – or actual usage – of strategic nuclear weapons.'

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Representatives of the Council on Geostrategy are available for interview.

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Notes to editors:

1. The Council on Geostrategy was launched on 2nd March 2021. More information can be found on our [website](#), including our [mission statement](#).
2. The Council on Geostrategy has an [Advisory Board](#) of 16 individuals with experience in politics, the military, diplomacy and academia.

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