

Response to Foreign Policy Centre on the UK Strategic Defence Review

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The most striking suggestion in the Strategic Defence Review (SDR), is that Britain should discuss "the potential benefits and feasibility of enhanced UK participation in NATO's nuclear mission"².

In our submission to the UKSDR (at the invitation of the Foreign Policy Centre), and in the context of the nuclear threat posed by Russian long-range missiles, we suggested that "the UK could consider contributing to the further strengthening of NATO's nuclear posture by considering playing a greater role in NATO's DCA force (dual capable aircraft of five allies carrying US warheads)"³.

We made this proposal in full awareness of past criticisms of the DCA force in terms of its effectiveness and operational application and the availability of other capabilities - criticisms which could question the devotion of scarce defence resources to this mission. However, we were aware of the value of the DCA force in terms of NATO nuclear burden sharing and the recent focus on Russian sub-strategic nuclear capabilities. Both factors, in our view, argued in favour of UK participation in the NATO nuclear force. Such a development is facilitated, as the Review points out, by the purchase of the F-35 A/B aircraft.

The recommendation by the SDR that the UK commences discussions on enhanced UK participation in NATO's nuclear mission constitutes, potentially, a substantial change in the UK nuclear posture.

Participation in NATO's DCA force is not without its operational difficulties, particularly if the F-35s are needed elsewhere. But these complications are present in the current DCA arrangements. The F-16s

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² Ministry of Defence, 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad', June 2025 (p. 102),

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home_strong_abroad.pdf

³ Foreign Policy Centre, 'Submission to the Strategic Defence Review', September 2024

currently filling the role are frequently in different areas quite unrelated to their nuclear and deterrence function - such as air policing or, for a time, in Afghanistan. These are clearly issues which will need to be considered in the future development of NATO nuclear policy and the introduction of new systems.

The Review also says that Britain and NATO need 'capabilities necessary to deter nuclear use at any scale'. This would require the development, also by the UK, of new nuclear capabilities, consistent with the Review's emphasis on additional means for deep strike and for enhanced UK participation in the NATO nuclear mission.

Furthermore, the SDR suggests that the UK should facilitate greater coherence between conventional and nuclear components of NATO's deterrence and defence posture. The call for more coherence between the nuclear and conventional components reflects the longstanding linkage between the two components in Alliance doctrine.

During the Cold War, the strategy of Flexible Response established the stages under which nuclear weapons could be introduced. That was a relatively stable and static situation, where NATO sought to deter a monolithic military force along predictable axes of attack. Tomorrow's conditions may be entirely different, more fluid and less predictable in the points of military pressure that Russia chooses to exert. In these entirely transformed conditions, NATO will once again need to think through the conditions under which it may need to turn to the use of its nuclear assets.

In the Cold War, and particularly by means of high-level exercises, there was a well-developed understanding between all allies of the procedures, problems and practicalities of resorting to the use of nuclear weapons. In our opinion, no such understanding exists today. This is another aspect of deterrence that must be relearned, albeit in new and far less predictable circumstances.

The call for "greater coherence," therefore, could also suggest the need to go further in defining the employment of such capabilities. This obviously belongs in the highly confidential and coordinated arena of NATO planning. However, it is a reminder that it is not only the Russians who need to plan how and when to use their nuclear assets. It is also a reminder that the Alliance may have forgotten how to exercise theirs.

We also note that we suggested that the UK could take the lead in pressing for an arms control approach to the problem of ground-launched long range capabilities in Europe. Unfortunately, this thought was not pursued by the SDR.

More generally, the SDR leaves many fundamental questions unanswered, relying on the assumption, or hope, that NATO will continue much as it did before Trump. The military implications for force capabilities and structure of having to operate in a purely European framework or a US-lite NATO framework are not explored. There is, however, a surprising indication that while the UK has always

declared the primacy of NATO in strategic and defence terms, in practice, it has not taken its contribution to NATO's military posture as seriously as it pretended. To quote from the SDR itself:

“In a shift in approach, the Alliance should be mainstreamed in how Defence plans, thinks, and acts.”⁴. “The Alliance must be the starting point for how the Armed Forces are developed, organised, equipped, and trained ...”⁵.

It is therefore surprising that the SDR does not refer to NATO's regional defence plans, developed by SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander Europe) and agreed at Vilnius in 2023, or the capabilities which are required of the UK by these plans. Much of the details of the capabilities needed by SACEUR's plans, of course, remain classified. However, the lack of information, even general, about what NATO requires of the UK in military terms makes it difficult to understand the consequences of the new “Nato first” approach.

In short, the SDR does not answer the question of what, as a baseline, the UK contribution to NATO is required by NATO to be. We also refer to this point in our submission on the SDR⁶.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this piece are those of the individual authors and do not reflect the views of The Foreign Policy Centre.

⁴ Ministry of Defence, ‘The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad’, June 2025 (p. 15), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home_strong_abroad.pdf

⁵ Ministry of Defence, ‘The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad’, June 2025 (p. 37), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home_strong_abroad.pdf

⁶ Foreign Policy Centre, ‘Submission to the Strategic Defence Review’, September 2024