BASIC is an independent think tank providing insight and analysis on the threat of nuclear weapons, global strategic security and non-proliferation. BASIC has 30 years of experience building an extensive and diverse network across Europe, the United States and the Middle East on issues related to nuclear weapons and non-proliferation. We take a non-partisan, dialogue-based and inclusive approach, seeking to create spaces for engagement in the interests of nuclear disarmament.

1. Summary

1.1 This evidence relates primarily to trends in the global nuclear order since the 2015 NSS/SDSR and the UK’s nuclear weapons programme. It argues that the deteriorating strategic political and security context and reductions in trust have stifled constructive engagement on multilateral disarmament, while emerging technologies are likely to overturn entrenched strategic choices. These trends have highlighted the failure of the Government to think holistically about the way in which continued nuclear possession increases global insecurity and how short-term reactions to immediate security challenges can perpetuate long-term strategic challenges in the global nuclear order. It proposes the UK needs to urgently inject leadership into nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation efforts, revisit the role strategic ambiguity in its defence planning and defed against a new nuclear arms race in Europe.

2. Changes to the strategic political and security context

2.1 The main obstacle to progress on multilateral disarmament has been the rapidly deteriorating strategic political and security context which has stifled constructive engagement. Renewed tensions in Europe and on the Korean Peninsula, along with an unconventional and unpredictable approach from President Trump, have heightened fears of nuclear use.

2.2 There have been deeply disturbing trends within some nuclear weapons states to weaken nuclear restraint and make open or veiled nuclear threats more frequently. President Trump and Kim Jong-Un’s nuclear sabre rattling on the Korean Peninsula raise the spectre of nuclear use. Both the United States and Russia have nuclear doctrines that now consider limited nuclear strike to control an escalating conflict. And even the UK and Russia exchanged nuclear threats during the 2017 General Election, after the UK Defence Secretary asserted that the UK would consider a preemptive nuclear first strike.¹

2.3 At the same time, the majority of nuclear weapon states continue to modernise their nuclear arsenals, many making them more accurate and more ‘usable’ in ways that blur their distinction with conventional weapons. This February, the United States published its Nuclear Posture Review, outlining the largest nuclear weapons build-up since the Reagan Administration. The United States intends to build new low-yield sea-launched nuclear ballistic missiles and sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles, all designed to be used in sub-strategic scenarios.² Russia and China continue their nuclear modernisation on the justification of the threat posed by the US’ nuclear and conventional superiority, and Russia stands accused of breaking the 1987 INF Treaty with new deployments of missiles in Europe.

2.4 The deterioration of the strategic environment has been coupled with a crisis in arms control and non-proliferation agreements internationally. In Europe, the INF Treaty Crisis threatens to hold future arms control in Europe hostage and the window is closing for the United States and Russia to extend New START or negotiate a


² Nuclear Posture Review 2018, US Department of State
follow-on agreement by 2021. President Trump’s decertification of the JCPoA both increases the risk of Iranian proliferation and could kill any hopes of progress on a WMD Free Zone Middle East at the 2020 NPT Review Conference. Little progress has been made in the Conference on Disarmament or the NPT Review Cycle since 2015.

2.5 Nuclear deterrence relationships are likely to be complicated by emerging technologies in the future: cyber capabilities; autonomous platforms; hypersonic glide vehicles; improved delivery platforms and AI all affect the risk of conflicts going nuclear by collapsing the battle-space, shortening decision-making time and making nuclear weapons less reliable as a strategic deterrent. These technologies could both increase and decrease states reliance on nuclear weapons as they could undermine the effectiveness of nuclear deterrents and prompt states to attempt to deter emerging strategic threats with nuclear weapons.

2.6 These challenges highlight the perception of non-nuclear weapons states that nuclear weapon states have not made meaningful progress on disarmament, culminating in the Treaty of the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons - more commonly referred to as the Ban Treaty. To date nuclear weapon states and their allies, apart from the Netherlands, have refused to engage with the Ban process. Their responses in the years ahead could come to be seen as a touchstone for their political will to engage in the broader project of disarmament and a measure of responsible behaviour.

2.7 The reasons for this deterioration and polarisation in the international strategic environment are multifaceted, but states have a shared responsibility for the current situation. It is easier, and often logical, for states to react to short-term security challenges rather than make long-term decisions that deal with the causes of global insecurity. Such an approach can lead to dangerous action-reaction cycles and arms races, promoting a zero-sum approach in which one’s security is based on another’s insecurity. Rather than blame others, the UK should think about how its nuclear weapons decisions and international diplomacy may be interpreted by others and whether these decisions contribute towards the goal of global nuclear disarmament.

3. Shortcomings of the 2015 NSS/SDSR and UK action to date

3.1 Given these trends, the 2015 NSS/SDSR failed to adequately address the magnitude of the crisis in the global nuclear order. It insufficiently reflected on the importance of progress on multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation for improving global security.

3.2 The review identified the United States and NATO as a cornerstone for UK security. Since then, the US may have undermined the objectives of the NSS by worsening tension with Russia by particular decisions in its modernisation of its nuclear arsenal, undermined the JCPoA and cast ambiguity over its commitment to NATO. Instead of describing current relations and short term threats in the Euro-Atlantic relations, which are subject to change, the UK should consider what a sustainable Euro-Atlantic and NATO-Russia security relationship would look like and consider how best to achieve this in a fluctuating future environment.

3.3 The review failed to account for the negative effects of strategic ambiguity in nuclear signalling with nuclear adversaries. Although nuclear signalling requires a degree of ambiguity to ensure adversaries do not push against red lines, clarity and restraint also benefit signalling. Mutual fear and distrust contribute to global insecurity. In practice, the UK Government’s statements in 2017 that it would be prepared to launch a nuclear first-strike against Russia and use nuclear weapons to ‘kill 100,000 men, women and children,’ undermined the UK’s legitimacy within the international community, unnecessarily raised tension, and went beyond the UK’s traditional declaratory policy.

3.4 Similarly, the review failed to account for the negative aspects of strategic ambiguity in nuclear signalling with non-nuclear weapon states. While the UK upheld its guarantees not to threaten nuclear use against non-nuclear

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3 Understanding Nuclear Weapons Risks, UNIDIR, 2017)

weapon states, its caveats to these assurances undermine the positive impact of them. These allow states to doubt the UK’s veracity and increase the saliency of nuclear weapons by signalling nuclear weapons could be used against other weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical and biological weapons, and even perhaps future technologies, lending these weapons legitimacy as deterrence. There seems to be an attitude that the UK is only prepared to promise not to use its nuclear weapons in circumstances where it were to judge that it would not want to. This is not reassuring to the rest of the international community, and undermines attempts which UK diplomats are involved with to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons.

3.5 The review did not propose any new UK action to break the deadlock in multilateral negotiations on disarmament. Yet, as the BASIC Trident Commission concluded in 2014, the UK must show far stronger future leadership on multilateral disarmament and could through leading diplomatic initiatives in the UN and NATO, building on its technical expertise on verification, and leading by example to break stalemates in multilateral diplomacy.

3.6 Nor did the review comment on the UK’s nuclear modernisation in terms of its Article VI commitment to work towards nuclear disarmament. It failed to assess whether the continued possession of nuclear weapons is a driver of future threats the UK seeks to deter. Other nuclear weapons states justify their nuclear arsenals to deter nuclear challenges, including the UK. The UK’s nuclear arsenal could promote proliferation abroad, as states are seen to not engage in negotiations on global disarmament in good faith.

4. The UK’s nuclear deterrent

4.1 The 2015 NSS/SDSR and 2016 vote in Parliament committed the UK to replace its four Vanguard Class nuclear-armed submarines with four successor Dreadnought class submarines. However, given these submarines will be operational until the early 2060s, the UK Government has insufficiently accounted for how emerging technologies could undermine these systems. Cyber threats remain a risk for the UK deterrent from procurement through operation. Similarly, underwater drone technology combined with magnetic anomaly detection, antineutrino detection and advanced sonar could compromise the UK’s second strike capability.

4.2 There are concerns over the cost of replacing our nuclear deterrent considering the UK’s overstretched military budget. Although MoD’s core budget will be 5% higher in real terms in 2020/21 compared to 2015/16, the UK has overcommitted on this increase. Spending on strategic programmes will amount to a third of procurement by 2020/21 and spending on submarines and nuclear related programmes (including the UK’s attack submarines) will amount for £44 billion, 25% of total equipment spending over the next 10 years.

5. Rebalancing the 2015 NSS/SDSR

5.1 In order to adapt to the changed strategic environment, the UK could assert leadership on global multilateral disarmament to reinvigorate the step-by-step approach. This could include better integrating the goal of nuclear disarmament into security decision-making, prioritising the NPT review cycle in government planning as well as developing a strategy to ensure that any damage to the NPT that might have been caused by the polarisation between the Ban Treaty states and those opposed does not continue, and that the next decade is characterised by responsible disarmament, not rearmament.

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10 The Defence Equipment Plan 2016, Ministry of Defence, January 2017, p. 20
5.2 The UK could reconsider the role of strategic ambiguity in UK nuclear weapons policy towards nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states. By clarifying the conditions in which the UK would sanction nuclear use the UK could de-escalate nuclear tension, restart a much needed discussion on declaratory policy and demonstrate leadership in reducing nuclear risks.\(^\text{11}\)

5.3 In 2014 the Trident Commission, hosted by BASIC came to the decision that the UK should renew its nuclear deterrent if this might play a decisive future role in the defence of the UK,’ but rejected ‘the case for retaining a military nuclear capability as a general insurance against an uncertain future.’\(^\text{12}\) The Government should investigate the role of its nuclear deterrent against specific future threats in light of the impact of emerging technologies and the role the of nuclear weapons in creating future security challenges.

5.4 The UK should leverage its special relationship with the United States and position in NATO to de-escalate nuclear tensions in Europe and Europe’s surrounding. The UK should confront the United States on the more dangerous elements contained in the US Nuclear Posture Review, and work to defend existing arms control with Russia and create the conditions for sustainable security in Europe in a way that is cooperative rather than adversarial.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^\text{11}\) Renewing Interest in Negative Security Assurances
\(^\text{12}\) The Trident Commission, p5