

Prospects for the UK's nuclear arms control and non-proliferation policy after the publication of the integrated review of "Global Britain in a competitive age"

ICHIMASA Sukeyuki, Senior Fellow, Policy Studies Department, Defense Policy Division

NIDS コメンタリー

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Introduction: Great Britain lays out a new, strengthened nuclear deterrence approach

The new approach to nuclear deterrence unveiled in the "Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy" paper released on March 16, 2021 by the UK Government (hereafter referred to as the "Global Britain Report")¹ has generated significant discussion in the context of nuclear arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation. Specifically, the Report lays out the determination that maintaining the existing cap on the stockpile of nuclear warheads is no longer possible based on its understanding of the current evolving security environment, and furthermore a stance of maintaining the minimum destructive power needed to guarantee that the UK's deterrent remains credible and effective against the full range of state nuclear threats from any direction.² In concrete terms, the Report announced that 1. the stockpile of nuclear warheads, which had been planned for reduction to not more than 180 by the mid-2020s, would be moved to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads, and 2. given the changing security and technological environment, the UK government would extend the long-standing policy of deliberate ambiguity regarding when, how, and at what scale it would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons and no longer give public figures for its operational stockpile, deployed warhead, or deployed missile numbers. Furthermore, the nuclear weapons strategic delivery system (described below) is unchanged, and the Report did not make clear if review of the operational structure was included. In addition, the Report states that deliberate ambiguity contributes to strategic stability by making the calculations of potential attackers more complex as well as by reducing the risk of deliberate usage of nuclear weapons by actors seeking advantage from pre-

¹ "Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy," Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty, March 2021, pp. 76-78.

² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

emptive strikes. Put more bluntly, it could be pointed out that 1. represents a quantitative increase in nuclear deterrence and 2. aims to decrease nuclear transparency. Regarding the increased nuclear warhead stockpile cap, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that this review is consistent with the evolving security environment, including heightened technological and doctrinal threats, and emphasized the necessity of the increase as per the wording of the Report.³ However, the details of the threats behind these perceptions have not been made public, which has led to a range of criticisms, both within the UK and abroad.⁴

Studies show that the slogan “Global Britain” itself is not necessarily new. The first time the “Global Britain” concept was publicly mentioned with regard to foreign policy was in the context of negotiations about the UK leaving the European Union (i.e. Brexit), when, in her January 2017 address laying out the country’s basic stance, then-Prime Minister Theresa May described how the UK would also turn its attention to areas outside the EU.⁵ However, in terms of specific foreign policy, there had been – until the release of the Report – almost no allusions in policy papers etc. to reviews of the likes of nuclear deterrence or nuclear policy. Furthermore, this was the case despite active debate on the UK’s dispatch of its naval vessels (most notably the aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth*) to the Indo-Pacific,⁶ with reference to a review of the UK’s role in the world. For example, the “National Security Capability Review” (NSCR),⁷ released by the UK Cabinet Office in March 2018, emphasizes the present-day importance of nuclear deterrence, which has existed for over 60 years to deter the most extreme threats to the UK’s national security and way of life, helping to guarantee the UK’s security and that of its allies. The NSCR also highlights the necessity of a more comprehensive deterrent approach, which is whole-of-government in nature and strengthened by the Fusion Doctrine titled “modern deterrence.” In relation to nuclear deterrence, the NSCR also mentions the procurement of new patrol aircraft and the

³ Reuters, March 16, 2021.

⁴ The following are referred to as representative examples. Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, “UK to Increase Cap on Nuclear Warhead Stockpile,” *Arms Control Today*, April 2021; “UK to increase nuclear warhead cap in integrated review of defence and foreign policy,” International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, March 15, 2021; John R Walker, “British Nuclear Weapons Stockpiles by Year: 1953-77,” *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 166, no. 4 (2021), p. 10; Albin Aronsson, “Global Britain: Navigating between Europe and the Indo-Pacific?” *FOI Memo*, vol. 7710 (December 2021), pp. 4-5.

⁵ “The government’s negotiating objectives for exiting the EU: PM speech,” GOV.UK, January 17, 2017.

⁶ Carl Thayer, “After Brexit: Global Britain Plots Course to Return to the Far East A post-Brexit Britain will double down on the Asia-Pacific,” *The Diplomat*, January 17, 2019.

⁷ “National Security Capability Review,” UK Cabinet Office, March 2018, p. 11.

development of submarines capable of carrying nuclear weapons. However, it is difficult to draw the conclusion that either supports the case for the necessity of expanding the nuclear policy of deliberate ambiguity and increasing the stockpile of nuclear warheads.

In other settings as well, examples such as the memorandum⁸ regarding the Global Britain concept presented by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee in 2018 focused on the UK's presence and influence overseas; while this memo allocated pages to the Indo-Pacific, it did not mention a review of nuclear deterrence. A September 2019 article⁹ in the *Sunday Telegraph* by Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab on the topic of Global Britain as well as a speech¹⁰ on February 3, 2020 by Prime Minister Boris Johnson discussing content related to the Global Britain Report were in the same vein.

It could further be said that references to strengthening nuclear deterrence are difficult to find¹¹ among the Global Britain-related commentary within the UK before the release of the Global Britain Report.

1. Background to the release of the Global Britain Report

The introduction to this commentary provided an overview of the Global Britain Report, with a particular focus on nuclear deterrence. Not only did the Report lay out new post-Brexit foreign and security policy, but – as the name “Integrated Review” suggests – it also encompassed many more areas. They include the UK's strengths in the defense and security fields, its position as a great science and tech superpower, and global leadership in diplomacy, development, conflict resolution and poverty reduction. In addition, the Report also articulated the UK's stance across a wide range of other areas, such as in terms of being a soft power superpower, a responsible cyber power, and a world leader in climate action. Particularly in terms of foreign and security policy, the Report clearly outlines the approach of the Indo-Pacific tilt, placing China, which poses a systemic

⁸ Written Evidence – Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FPW0027).

⁹ “Global Britain is leading the world as a force for good: article by Dominic Raab,” *Sunday Telegraph*, September 23, 2019.

¹⁰ “Prime Minister Boris Johnson's speech in Greenwich,” GOV.UK, February 3, 2020.

¹¹ The following are referred to as representative examples. Bill Hayton, “China and Brexit Drive the UK's ‘Tilt’ to Indo-Pacific,” Chatham House, November 27, 2020; Veerle Nouwens, “Re-Examining the UK's Priorities in the Asia-Pacific Region,” Royal United Services Institute, March 17, 2020.

challenge to the UK's security, prosperity and values,¹² uppermost in mind. The Report also includes many other noteworthy statements and discussion points, such as announcing investment in research in AI and other battle-winning technologies (drones and cyber warfare)¹³ while reshaping the UK's armed forces for a more competitive age. The content of the Report has attracted significant attention, in part because the details of the UK's post-Brexit foreign and security policy had theretofore not really been made clear, and it has to date been analyzed from many different perspectives. Supportive examples include opinions welcoming a comprehensive smart power strategy for strengthening the UK's security, international influence and prosperity,¹⁴ as well as viewpoints positively assessing the reconfirmation of commitment to European defense after Brexit.¹⁵ By contrast, there have also been concerns expressed about the strategic risks the UK will likely face in the future, as well as issues pointed out in terms of the budgetary requirements for implementing the policies outlined in the Report.¹⁶ In addition, concerns have been expressed for some time regarding the diminishing of the UK's external commitments due to the economic losses caused by Brexit,¹⁷ as well as skepticism about the UK planning further investment and expenditure in the security field as it works to recover economically from the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸ In this regard, domestic media reports have questioned whether the UK can sustain its Global Britain strategy for a long time, given the decline in trade with the EU after Brexit and the worsening labor shortage caused by restrictions on immigration.¹⁹ From the present-day perspective, these points are also difficult to ignore. On the other hand, while some have welcomed the Indo-Pacific tilt as part of the Global Britain strategy,²⁰ the AUKUS agreement with the US and Australia, for example, has had a serious negative

¹² "Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy," p. 22.

¹³ James Crabtree, "Boris Johnson Unveils His Post-Brexit 'Tilt' to Asia," *Foreign Policy*, March 17, 2021.

¹⁴ Alistair MacDonald, "Global Britain in a competitive age," British Council, March 2021.

¹⁵ Georgina Wright and Bruno Tertrais, "The UK's Integrated Review: What Global Britain Means for France," Institut Montaigne, March 17, 2021.

¹⁶ Michael Clarke, "Integrated Review 2021: Is Defence in for a 'Pounding'?" *Forces Net*, March 14, 2021.

¹⁷ Michito Tsuruoka, "Igirisu no Boueigaikou Boueikan'yo – Gainen no Hensen to 'Eigun Brand'" ["Britain's Defense Diplomacy and Defense Engagement – Changes in the Concept and the 'British Army Brand'"], (The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Private-Sector Defense Diplomacy Research Unit, Nation Reports, September 2018), p. 14.

¹⁸ Neil Winn, "Global Britain in a competitive age," *UK in a Changing Europe*, March 18, 2021.

¹⁹ Robert Wright, "UK immigration: Global Britain or the hostile environment?" *Financial Times*, July 28, 2021.

²⁰ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "Expert Commentary: Understanding the UK's 'tilt' towards the Indo-Pacific," International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 15, 2021.

impact on UK-French relations.²¹ Incidentally, there are commentators who perceive tilting to the Indo-Pacific as being a trend in recent European foreign policy,²² in that Germany is believed to have begun considering such a tilt in 2018 and France in 2020, with the EU also working on its own vision.

In any case, the UK's new principles for action to which much attention is being paid have not only been clarified further as a result of this Report, but there are even positive assessments being made of the consistency between the policy slogan and the principles for action, as if Brexit was for the purpose of implementing Global Britain.²³ However, apart from concerns about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, there has been relatively little discussion of the background to the UK's review of its nuclear deterrence and the implications for international security.

2. The UK's nuclear policy after the Cold War

Looking back, what course has the UK's nuclear policy taken through history to the present day? The UK declared in 1962 that it would use nuclear deterrence for the defense of allied countries, and has positioned nuclear force as the ultimate guarantor of collective security within NATO.²⁴ Based on the 1958 Mutual Defense Agreement and the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement with the US, the UK has procured Trident missiles and other nuclear weapon-related components from the US, while maintaining its independence in the employment of nuclear force.²⁵ More recently, the UK signed the Teutates Treaty with France in 2010, promoting collaboration on technical development related to the safety and effective maintenance of nuclear weapon stockpiles.²⁶

On the other hand, the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) White Paper of 1998 has largely shaped UK nuclear policy in recent years. Against the background of the collapse of the Warsaw Treaty Organization after the end

²¹ Alex Therrien, "Aukus: France pulls out of UK defence talks amid row," BBC News, September 20, 2021.

²² Bill Hayton, "China and Brexit Drive the UK's 'Tilt' to Indo-Pacific," Chatham House, November 27, 2020.

²³ Ryuji Honmyo "SSG Column 191: Eikoku ga 'Sougou Review (Global Britain in a competitive age)' wo Kouhyou – 'Global Britain' no Gutaizou to Indotaiheiyou no Kanshin –" ["SSG Column 191: Britain Releases the 'Integrated Review (Global Britain in a competitive age)' – Specific Image of "Global Britain" and its Interest in the Indo-Pacific"], JMSDF Command and Staff College, March 26, 2021.

²⁴ "Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy," p. 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ "National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom," Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty, November 2015, p. 35.

of the Cold War, the SDR held that there is no longer any direct military threat to the UK and laid out the necessity of improvement to rapid military deployment capabilities as well as jointery. At the same time, it stated that nuclear deterrence would be maintained at a reduced level, and nuclear weapons delivery systems would be consolidated to missile submarines.²⁷ Thus, since the WE.177B air-dropped nuclear bomb was retired in March 1998, the UK's nuclear force has been comprised solely of the Trident II D5 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM). Since then, the UK's policy papers consistently advocated for the downsizing of its nuclear forces. The 2006 defense white paper "The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent" held that the continued possession of nuclear weapons enables the deterrence of future threats, and thus determined to maintain nuclear deterrence systems based on missile submarines beyond the 2020s. In addition, the white paper signaled maintaining the minimum nuclear deterrent capability necessary to provide effective deterrence, but conversely also laid out a stance of engaging in multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation by the UK setting the example of reducing its nuclear capabilities.²⁸

The 2010 "Strategic Defence and Security Review" (SDSR) stated that the nuclear warhead stockpile cap is planned to be reduced from not more than 225 to not more than 180 by the mid-2020s. In addition, it announced the determination that the number of warheads carried by each of the four *Vanguard* class missile submarines would be reduced from 48 to 40, and, based on improvements in the management of the warhead stockpile, the required number of operationally-available warheads would be reduced from fewer than 160 to no more than 120. It also announced that the number of missiles operational on each submarine would be reduced from 16 to no more than 8. It furthermore reconfirmed²⁹ the policy of Continuous At Sea Deterrence (CASD, also known as Operation Relentless).³⁰ This policy, which has been in operation since the 1960s and bears sudden attack by the Soviet Union on Western Europe uppermost in mind, involves one missile submarine always being out on

²⁷ Tom Dodd and Mark Oakes, *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, House of Commons Library, October 15, 1998, p. 32.

²⁸ "The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent," Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs By Command of Her Majesty, December 2006, pp. 7-8.

²⁹ "Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review," Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty, October 2010, pp. 38-39.

³⁰ Malcolm Chalmers, "Continuous At-Sea Deterrence: Costs and Alternatives," Royal United Services Institute, July 2010.

sea patrol. As well as maintaining these approaches, the 2015 SDSR stated that renewal of the nuclear warheads is not necessary until at least the second half of the 2030s or even later. At the same time, however, it committed to continued investment to maintain the ability to ensure warhead stockpile safety and security, and to enable development of replacement warheads if necessary. In addition, it indicated that development of the successor to the *Vanguard* class missile submarines, whose retirement is scheduled to begin in the early 2030s, is necessary, and that the first of the successors (the *Dreadnought* class) is projected to be commissioned in the early 2030s.³¹

By contrast, the UK has adopted five principles of nuclear deterrence,³² which include nuclear weapons not being an offensive military tool but rather being possessed to deter and prevent nuclear danger, as well as the pursuit of minimum deterrence. Combined with those limited nuclear capabilities, it has hardly been discussed in the post-Cold War UK if nuclear forces have any role other than as a hedge against future uncertainty. Despite this, it has been indicated that the currently-planned nuclear weapon capabilities are accepted to be sufficient deterrent to a nuclear-armed adversary in the future.³³

3. Implications of the UK nuclear deterrence review from the perspective of global nuclear force distribution

In 2010, when the UK announced the plan to reduce its nuclear warhead stockpile cap to not more than 180, US President Barack Obama was attempting to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons under the slogan “a world without nuclear weapons.” However, in the “Nuclear Posture Review” (NPR) announced in 2018, his successor Donald Trump’s administration referred to the new geopolitical confrontation between great powers, expanded the nuclear weapon modernization policy, and also disclosed its approach of developing ship-launched cruise missiles as well as low-yield SLBM nuclear warheads with Russia in mind.³⁴ In addition, the Obama administration in 2010 began to disclose information about nuclear warhead stockpile numbers, as it is

³¹ “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom,” Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty, November 2015, pp. 34-36.

³² “Policy paper 2010 to 2015 government policy: UK nuclear deterrent Appendix 1: UK nuclear deterrence,” GOV.UK, Updated May 8, 2015.

³³ Malcolm Chalmers, “The United Kingdom: A Status Quo Nuclear Power?” in Malcolm Chalmers, et.al., *Small Nuclear Forces: Five Perspectives*, Royal United Services Institute, December 2011, p. 21.

³⁴ “Nuclear Posture Review,” US Department of Defense, February 2018, pp. 20-21, 54-55.

important for nuclear non-proliferation initiatives and the pursuit of nuclear weapons reduction. These disclosures later spread to the UK and France, but were repudiated by the Trump administration in 2019.³⁵ It was against this background that the Global Britain Report was prepared, being initially scheduled for publication in 2020, the year of the US Presidential election, though its announcement was delayed to 2021, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁶ In light of the above – though the details of the UK’s shift in approach regarding nuclear deterrence are not yet clear and thus still open to conjecture – it is surely difficult to deny that the UK may have been in part influenced by the international security outlook demonstrated by the Trump administration’s nuclear posture, as well as its own shift in stance regarding information disclosure about nuclear warhead stockpile numbers.

Table: Changes in global nuclear force distribution from 2010 to 2020

	2010			2015			2020		
	Deployed warheads	Other warheads	Total	Deployed warheads	Other warheads	Total	Deployed warheads	Other warheads	Total
US	2468	7100	9600	~2080	5180	~7260	1570	4050	5800
Russia	4630	7300	12000	~1780	~5720	~7500	1570	4805	6375
UK	160	65	225	150	~65	~215	120	95	215
France	300	--	300	~290	~10	~300	280	10	290
China	--	200	240	--	~260	~260	280	10	290
India	--	60-80	60-80	--	90-110	90-110	--	150	150

³⁵ Shervin Taheran, “News Briefs: U.S. Reverses Nuclear Stockpile Transparency,” *Arms Control Today*, June 2019.

³⁶ Michito Tsuruoka, “Research Report: Was the ‘Mainstreaming’ of Europe in Abe Diplomacy Achieved?” (second volume), The Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 23, 2021.

Pakistan	--	70-90	70-90	--	100-120	100-120	--	160	160
Israel	--	80	80	--	~80	~80	--	90	90
North Korea	No data	No data	No data	--	--	6-8	--	(30-40)	(30-40)

Source: Table created by the author based on the following source materials.

“Nuclear weapon modernization continues but the outlook for arms control is bleak: New SIPRI Yearbook out now,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 15, 2020; “SIPRI Yearbook 2015 11. World nuclear forces,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, November 2015; “SIPRI Yearbook 2010 8. World nuclear forces,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, August 2010.

It is important that there be no misunderstanding; the UK’s nuclear forces remain the smallest of the five nuclear-weapon states. Even if its stockpile were to reach the announced limit of 260, it can be said that the UK’s relative scale and standing would not significantly change (see the Table). If anything, the global trend of modernizing nuclear weapons has long been noted,³⁷ and there are even cases such as that of China, where concerns have been raised that it may at least double its nuclear capability in the next decade.³⁸ In the light of the distribution of nuclear weapons in the world today, the successor to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) would have significant implications for the new strategic stability around nuclear weapons. On the other hand, China and the de-facto nuclear weapons states, whose tendency to increase their nuclear capability has been noted, are also important focal points in the context of arms control and disarmament non-proliferation.

³⁷ Sukeyuki Ichimasa, “Nuclear arms control: Modernizing nuclear forces and creating a positive environment for nuclear disarmament,” National Institute for Defense Studies (ed.), *East Asian Strategic Review 2020*, National Institute for Defense Studies, 2020, pp. 10-11.

³⁸ “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020,” Office of the Secretary of Defense, September 2020, p. 85.

4. Impact on nuclear arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation

It is important to note, however, that the UK's recent policy on nuclear deterrence has very different implications in international politics. Firstly, in terms of its relations with the US, which supplies the UK's Trident II D5 missiles, it must be pointed out that – setting aside the period of the Trump administration – the UK has headed in a different direction to the Biden administration. Inaugurated in January 2021, the Biden administration has taken the stance of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons for its defense, reviving arms control, and not requiring new nuclear weapons.³⁹ Studies have expressed concern that the content of the recent Global Britain Report is nothing but a request to the US Congress for the budgetary measures required for the W93 SLBM warhead proposed during the Trump administration. Furthermore, in relation to US-Russia nuclear arms control, the Report may further complicate the Biden administration's efforts to pursue nuclear downscaling in relation to Russia, which desires the involvement of the UK and France in nuclear arms control negotiations.⁴⁰

Next, this article will explore the ways that the Global Britain Report may conceivably have an impact on international nuclear arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation efforts. The first potential impact is issues relating to the irreversibility principle of nuclear disarmament. In the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, the UK issued a statement that it would follow the principle of irreversibility of nuclear disarmament as an implementation of the “13 Practical Steps towards nuclear disarmament.”⁴¹ Moreover, during the most recent NPT Review Conference in 2015, the UK submitted a statement that clarified that, in addition to the CASD policy and information disclosure regarding the number of missiles carried by submarines etc., it would reduce the number of operationally-available nuclear warheads to an amount ranging from fewer than 160 to no more than 120.⁴² Given the announcement in the Global Britain Report that the UK

³⁹ At the time of writing, a new Nuclear Posture Review report has not yet been announced, but it is unlikely that the Biden administration will adopt a similar nuclear policy to that of the Trump administration. Ernest Moniz and Des Browne, “Boris Johnson risks a nuclear rift with Joe Biden,” *The Times*, April 13, 2021; Julian Borger, “Democrats urge Biden to keep pledge to limit nuclear weapons,” *The Guardian*, January 26, 2022.

⁴⁰ Daryl G. Kimball, “The UK's Nuclear U-Turn,” *Arms Control Today*, April 2021.

⁴¹ United Kingdom Permanent Representation to the Conference on Disarmament, “UK Statement to the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference,” New York, May 19, 2010.

⁴² NPT/CONF.2015/29, paragraphs 28-29.

is planning to increase its nuclear warhead stockpile cap, the focus will be on how the UK will report on its implementation of the principle of irreversibility of nuclear disarmament at the next NPT Review Conference.

The second potential impact is the issue of nuclear transparency. Information disclosure related to nuclear weapons had previously been left to voluntary efforts made by nuclear-weapon states, but as indicated in the above-mentioned “National Report on the Implementation of Actions,” it was made compulsory at the 2015 NPT Review Conference. Moreover, together with the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and effective measures of nuclear disarmament, nuclear transparency became one of the most important issues.⁴³ In its Statement at the Conference, the UK declared that “Only by talking openly and frankly can we create the right conditions for more rapid nuclear disarmament. And we look forward to building such initiatives.”⁴⁴ In light of emphasizing the significance of taking steps toward further nuclear transparency, it is surely the case that the announcement in the Global Britain Report of moves which reduce transparency can ultimately only leave the impression that the UK’s commitment to the NPT has decreased. Whatever the motivation of moves which reduce transparency, a thorough explanation will likely be demanded of the UK as to how those moves relate to creating in the future “the right conditions for more rapid nuclear disarmament” which it had previously pursued.

The third potential impact that has been raised, even though it does not directly relate to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, is about concerns regarding the subjects of nuclear deterrence. As outlined above, the Global Britain Report mentions that the background to raising the nuclear warhead stockpile cap is heightened technological and doctrinal threats. Commentators have opined that such references may suggest that, in the event of crippling biological, chemical, cyber or “dirty bomb” attacks of mass proportions, the UK would consider a nuclear counterattack.⁴⁵ By coincidence, this suggestion can be considered to be broadly in line with

⁴³ Michiru Nishida, *Kaku no Toumeisei: Bei-So/Bei-Ro oyobi NPT to Chuugoku e no Tekiyoukanousei* [Nuclear Transparency: Possibility of Application to US-Soviet Union / US-Russia, and the NPT and China] (Shinzansha, 2020), pp. 198-199.

⁴⁴ “Statement by the United Kingdom, General Debate,” 2015 Review Conference of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, New York, April 27- May 22, 2015.

⁴⁵ William Booth, “Boris Johnson’s vision for post-Brexit ‘Global Britain’ includes more nuclear weapons,” *Washington Post*, March 17, 2021.

the viewpoint regarding subjects of nuclear deterrence outlined by the Trump administration at the 2018 NPR. Specifically, the 2018 NPR stated that the US nuclear forces contribute to the deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear attack.⁴⁶ It has been argued that a strategic non-nuclear attack, which is an extreme situation in which the US would consider using nuclear weapons, could include biological, chemical, conventional and even cyber-attacks.⁴⁷ By contrast, President Joe Biden once said he felt confident that sufficient progress had been made to adopt the “sole purpose” policy and declare “that deterring – and if necessary, retaliating against – a nuclear attack should be the sole purpose of the US nuclear arsenal.”⁴⁸ Given that a similar “sole purpose” policy was pursued during the Obama administration, but was not adopted in its original form, it is not clear whether the Biden administration’s consideration of it will produce any new results. However, if the concerns about the scope of the UK’s nuclear deterrence are correct, there could be serious differences in where the UK and US stand on nuclear deterrence policy. It is also feared that such an expansion of the scope of nuclear deterrence, as an example of the difficulty of reducing dependence on nuclear weapons, could ultimately become an impediment to future efforts at nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

Fourthly, it must be pointed out that the UK’s decision may have important implications for today’s nuclear arms control and disarmament non-proliferation efforts, which are facing major political challenges. In today’s context, the INF Treaty between the US and the Soviet Union/Russia, which had endured for 31 years, terminated in August 2019. The New START has just been agreed to be extended until 2026, but in many ways its future is still uncertain. After the INF Treaty terminated, President Trump proposed a “21st-century model of arms control” also involving China, but the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately rejecting this suggestion remains fresh in the memory.⁴⁹ The data exchange, validation, and inspection mechanisms between the US and Russia regarding missiles of 500-5500 km range, which were prohibited under the INF Treaty, have

⁴⁶ “Nuclear Posture Review 2018,” Office of the Secretary of Defense, February 2018, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Hirofumi Tosaki, “Chapter 1. Nuclear Disarmament,” Hiroshima Prefecture and the Center for the Promotion of Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, The Japan Institute of International Affairs. *2019 Edition Hiroshima Report: Evaluation of Achievement in Nuclear Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and Nuclear Security in 2018*. (The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2019), p. 43.

⁴⁸ *The Asahi Shimbun*, May 11, 2021.

⁴⁹ Ichimasa, “Nuclear arms control: Modernizing nuclear forces and creating a positive environment for nuclear disarmament,” p. 11.

already been lost, and there is no agreement restraining production and deployment of weapons in that category. On the other hand, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) framework took effect in January 2021, and the first Meeting of States Parties is scheduled to be held in June 2022. Despite opposition from all nuclear-weapon states, non-nuclear weapon states under the “nuclear umbrella,” and de-facto nuclear weapon states, the negotiation and adoption of the TPNW was driven by non-nuclear weapon states, which stressed the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Whatever its ultimate effectiveness, it is the first-ever multilateral treaty to prohibit the development, manufacturing, possession, usage, and threat of usage of nuclear weapons, and has been heralded as creating an international norm for nuclear disarmament.⁵⁰ In addition, the NPT, the multilateral treaty which forms the core international regime for nuclear non-proliferation, took effect in 1970 and was indefinitely extended in 1995, and Review Conferences have been held every five years. Because agreement was not reached about the Final Document at the most recent Review Conference in 2015, the direction of the next Conference in September 2022 is being paid significant attention. At the heart of the NPT is a “grand bargain”⁵¹: that each nuclear-weapon state “undertakes to pursue negotiation in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament,”⁵² and in exchange non-nuclear weapon states have an obligation of nuclear non-proliferation and the inalienable right to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. However, as nuclear disarmament efforts have stalled in recent years, there are deeply-held concerns⁵³ about fragmentation of initiatives by the international community between the new TPNW and the existing NPT regarding the way forward in nuclear disarmament. In such a context, it is hoped that nuclear-weapon states will pursue their obligation more so than previously.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Sukeyuki Ichimasa, “Nuclear Weapon States, Nuclear Umbrella States, and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW),” *NIDS Journal of Defense and Security*, No. 20, December 2019, pp. 24-29.

⁵¹ Nobumasa Akiyama, “Kakuheiki Fukakusan Jouyaku (NPT) no Naritachi” [“History of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)”], Nobumasa Akiyama (ed.), *NPT Kaku no Global Governance [NPT: Nuclear Global Governance]* (Iwanami Shoten, 2015), p. 22.

⁵² Article VI of the NPT.

⁵³ Ichimasa, “Nuclear Weapon States, Nuclear Umbrella States, and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW),” p. 48.

⁵⁴ Ichimasa, “Nuclear arms control: Modernizing nuclear forces and creating a positive environment for nuclear disarmament,” p. 26.

Against such a background, how can we analyze the effect of the Global Britain Report on nuclear arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation? An important focal point is likely to be how to interpret the impact of the UK – as a prominent democratic state which together with the US has led the international order since World War II – embarking on increasing its nuclear warhead stockpile cap and decreasing nuclear transparency. If the UK does in fact change direction and increase its nuclear warhead stockpile, it would be (after China) only the second example of expanding nuclear forces in the post-Cold War era.⁵⁵ At the very least, after the UK had been working to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons for the past ten years, there is likely room for discussion – including in relation to carrying out its obligations under Article VI of the NPT – of what sort of signal its shift in approach would send to both other nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states in terms of moving toward “a world without nuclear weapons.”

On that note, on March 16, 2021, a spokesperson for Prime Minister Johnson stated that the figure of 260 in terms of the nuclear warhead stockpile is not a target, but a cap, that the number of warheads would be adjusted appropriately through ongoing consideration in light of the security environment, and that the NPT does not demand reduction in the number of warheads.⁵⁶ However, it is still not clear what the intentions are behind the change of policy on the principle of irreversibility of nuclear disarmament and transparency of nuclear stockpile. Moreover, there should be a detailed explanation of what diplomatic stance the UK intends to take on nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

Conclusion

It has already been noted above that the spread of COVID-19 has led to the rescheduling of the NPT Review Conference to 2022. This raises the possibility that the 1st Meeting of State Parties to the TPNW, scheduled for June 2022, will be held before the NPT Review Conference. Originally, it was thought that the next NPT Review Conference would focus not only on progress in nuclear disarmament, but also on whether or not the TPNW

⁵⁵ “UK to increase nuclear warhead cap in integrated review of defence and foreign policy.”

⁵⁶ Reif and Bugos, “UK to Increase Cap on Nuclear Warhead Stockpile.”

would be mentioned in the final document. Perhaps in anticipation of the consequences of such a rescheduling of the NPT Review Conference, the actions of the five nuclear weapon states in early 2022 were swift and highly coordinated. In early January 2022, the P5 Conference issued a strong joint statement stating that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” and the five nuclear weapon states are attempting to clarify their commitment in avoiding arms races.⁵⁷ The question is how to balance these statements with the growing race to modernize nuclear weapons and the emergence of geopolitical rivalries between the great powers. A similar message once swept the world in the joint US-Soviet statement at the signing of the now defunct INF Treaty in 1987. However, the bold nuclear arms control efforts of that time have now been overshadowed, even between the US and Russia.

For the UK in particular, the focus will be on how to reconcile these statements with a shift in the principle of irreversibility of nuclear disarmament and reduced transparency of the nuclear weapons stockpile. The re-extension of the NPT Review Conference is tantamount to giving the UK more time to set out the background to the Global Britain Report and its future policy on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The UK should use the time to carefully explain what kind of nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation policy it intends to pursue as a result of shaking the principles of irreversibility and transparency of nuclear disarmament. In this sense, the decision to re-extend the NPT Review Conference could, depending on the circumstances, contribute to the UK developing smarter disarmament and non-proliferation diplomacy.

(Submitted on January 31, 2022)⁵⁸

(Postscript: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine since February 24 and its nuclear threats have been provoking various arguments about nuclear weapons and their role in deterrence among the international community. Thus, it must

⁵⁷ “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races,” The White House, January 3, 2022.

⁵⁸ This commentary was originally published in Japanese in May 2021 and has been partially updated to reflect the situation in early 2022. The author would like to acknowledge colleagues’ suggestions at the University of Cambridge, where he stayed as a visiting scholar while writing the revised version of this paper.

be stressed that even in such a challenging security environment, the significance of discussing nuclear arms control does not diminish, and its importance increases further.)

プロフィール

profile

ICHIMASA Sukeyuki
Senior Fellow
Policy Studies Department
Defense Policy Division

Areas of Expertise:
Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-
Proliferation, International Security
Studies

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Planning and Coordination Office, National Institute for Defense Studies

Telephone (direct): 03-3260-3011

Telephone (general): 03-3268-3111 (ext. 29171)

FAX: 03-3260-3034

* National Institute for Defense Studies website:

<http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/>