



Pugwash
conferences
on science and
world affairs

British Pugwash

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UK public opinion survey on nuclear weapons issues, 2023

In January 2023 British Pugwash and polling company Savanta conducted a survey of UK public opinion concerning nuclear weapons issues. The poll aimed to understand the views of the British public in this area and assess potential support for policies that advance nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

The poll asked 2,320 UK adults questions across a range of topical themes relating to nuclear weapons. These topics include: the Russia-Ukraine war, the UK's ongoing replacement of its nuclear weapon system, the possibility that US nuclear weapons will again be stationed in the UK, the significant increase to the UK's nuclear warhead stockpile cap, and the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

Our polling results show that there are a number of notable differences between the British public's views and the policies of the UK Government concerning nuclear weapons. Whilst 40% of UK adults support the UK possessing nuclear weapons, there is significant public support for policies which would control, limit, and even eliminate the UK's nuclear weapons—including amongst supporters of nuclear possession.

The full set of survey data is available here: <https://britishpugwash.org/2023-uk-public-opinion-survey-on-nuclear-weapons-article-and-data/>

Key findings:

1. On the UK's use of nuclear weapons

- The UK Government's [policy](#) is to consider using nuclear weapons 'only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO Allies'. UK and NATO policy is to not rule in or out the first use of nuclear weapons.
- Our poll found that 48% of UK adults oppose the first use of nuclear weapons by the UK. This finding builds on the results of the [survey](#) British Pugwash conducted in 2021 which found that two-thirds of the British public want NATO to renounce the first use of nuclear weapons. Our poll also found that 40% of UK adults support the UK using its nuclear weapons first in a conflict.

2. On the cost of replacing the UK's nuclear weapons

- The UK is replacing all four parts of its nuclear weapons system, including the submarine, missile, warhead, and infrastructure. The estimated cost of the four new nuclear-armed submarines is £31bn, and the estimated total cost of replacing the UK's nuclear weapons between 2019 and 2070 is at least £172bn.¹
- Our poll found that 42% of UK adults think that the estimated cost of replacing the UK's nuclear weapons does not represent value for money. 29% of UK adults thought that the estimated cost of replacing the UK's nuclear weapons represents value for money. 29% said they 'don't know' or were 'unsure' in response to this question.

3. On US nuclear weapons being stationed in the UK

¹ The £172bn figure was calculated by [Nuclear Information Service](#) in its 2019 report *Trouble Ahead*, and includes: i) the cost of replacing the four main parts of the UK's nuclear weapons programme ii) ongoing maintenance and in-service costs iii) some support costs e.g. from the Astute programme.

- UK Governments have previously allowed US nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable aircraft to be stored, maintained, and operated from UK military bases. The UK has not hosted US nuclear weapons since 2008. However, in April 2022, it was [reported](#) that RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk has been upgraded, potentially allowing the US to again deploy nuclear weapons in the UK.
- British public opinion is split over allowing the US to deploy nuclear weapons on UK territory. Our poll found that 34% of UK adults oppose, and 32% support, allowing the US to again station nuclear weapons in the UK.

4. On an international treaty to eliminate nuclear weapons

- In 2017, 122 states voted at the United Nations in support of the TPNW. This [treaty](#) prohibits the development, testing, production, acquisition, possession, stockpiling, use, and any threat to use nuclear weapons. If the UK wanted to join the treaty, it would have to destroy its nuclear arsenal first or present a legally binding plan to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. The UK has not yet signed or ratified the treaty.
- Our poll found that 39% of UK adults support the UK joining the TPNW. Amongst 18-34 year olds, just 13% opposed the UK joining the treaty, whilst 48% are supportive.

5. Varied views exist amongst those supporting UK nuclear possession. Women are less likely than men to support the UK's possession and first use of nuclear weapons

- Our poll found that 40% of UK adults (28% of women compared to 53% of men) are in favour of the UK possessing nuclear weapons. In addition, 26% of UK adults oppose UK nuclear possession, 29% neither support or oppose nuclear possession, and 5% said 'don't know' in response to this question.
- However, our poll shows that there are significant concerns, even amongst supporters of nuclear possession, about the UK Government's approach to nuclear weapons. For example, 23% of those who support nuclear possession don't think that the cost of replacing the UK's nuclear weapons represents value for money.
- Furthermore, 37% of those who support UK nuclear possession do not want the UK to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict. Notably, 36% of those who support the UK's possession of nuclear weapons want the UK to join an international agreement (the TPNW) that would eliminate the UK's nuclear arsenal.

6. The war in Ukraine has mainly strengthened *existing* support for UK nuclear possession

- Our data indicates that the Ukraine conflict has significantly strengthened support for the UK possessing nuclear weapons amongst those who already favoured possession. 67% of those who support nuclear possession said their position on this issue had been strengthened by the conflict. In addition, there was a relatively small increase (16%) in support for the UK possessing nuclear weapons amongst those who opposed nuclear possession prior to the conflict.
- Responses to this particular question likely reflect wider public [support](#) for the UK's involvement in the conflict and may thus be temporary. Moreover, 39% of UK adults said that the Ukraine conflict had 'made no difference' to their view on UK nuclear possession. Overall, our data, therefore, suggests that a key impact of the Ukraine war has been to reinforce support for UK nuclear possession amongst UK adults who already held this view.