



ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON GLOBAL NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND ARMS CONTROL

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LIZ SAVILLE-ROBERTS MP, BARONESS SUSAN MILLER, BARONESS CHRISTINE BLOWER,
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**Developments in UK and European Nuclear Weapons Policy
5.00pm to 6.30pm, Tuesday 20th October, House of Commons**

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

1. Key questions

- What recent developments of note have there been in NATO and European nuclear policy / rearmament?
- What are the implications of France's 'forward deterrence' strategy—and the deepening UK-French nuclear relationship—for European security and NATO?
- How are Germany, Poland and other allies' positions on nuclear proliferation evolving, both in terms of closer nuclear cooperation with France and whether they need their own nuclear capabilities?
- What recent developments of note have there been in the UK's nuclear weapons policy—for example, on the decision to purchase F-35A aircraft and join NATO's nuclear sharing mission; and develop the new Astraea warhead—and how do these relate to European politics and security?
- What are the benefits, costs and risks of UK nuclear possession in the current geopolitical context; and is continuous-at-sea-deterrence with Vanguard submarines in jeopardy?
- How can parliamentarians best scrutinise UK nuclear weapons decision-making; and how can the proposed House of Commons committee on Defence Nuclear Enterprise expenditure contribute to this goal?
- How can the UK fulfil its commitments under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and contribute to international peace and security at this time?

2. Developments in European / NATO nuclear weapons policy

On 2 March 2026 French President Emmanuel Macron [set out](#) a doctrine of “dissuasion avancée” (forward deterrence) committing France to deepen nuclear coordination with willing European allies through joint exercises, forward deployment of dual-capable Rafale jets, and allied support for France's strike capability—such as air defence and satellite intelligence—while stopping short of a formal NATO-

style guarantee. As Macron put it in his speech: “We must conceive our deterrence strategy within the depth of the European continent”

Analysts have [described](#) France’s move as being driven by European anxiety about the durability of the US nuclear umbrella under the Trump administration. For such observers, Europe is searching for an alternative source of deterrence, particularly vis-a-vis Moscow, given uncertainty regarding Washington’s decision-making.

Concerns about nuclear proliferation on the continent persist. Analysis by [Chatham House](#) published in March 2026 highlighted recent comments by the Polish Prime Minister about acquiring nuclear weapons. Macron’s coordination offer may thus be read partly as a preventive move, to discourage new national nuclear programmes in Warsaw or Berlin, by offering a role within a shared framework.

The UK-France nuclear relationship has also been enhanced. The [Northwood Declaration](#) of 10 July 2025—involving London and Paris—states for the first time that: “Our nuclear forces are independent, but can be coordinated.” Analysts from IISS [described](#) this as the “most far-reaching step yet in UK-French nuclear cooperation”, building on the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties and the 1995 Chequers Declaration, and positioning the UK as a “nuclear bridge” between Washington and Paris.

The above developments need to be viewed in relation to [nuclear-armed states’](#) efforts to modernise and enhance their nuclear forces; plus the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war—with the growing potential for European nations and NATO to be drawn further into the conflict—and the spectre of nuclear escalation.

3. Developments in UK nuclear weapons policy

At the NATO summit on 24 June 2025 the Prime Minister [announced](#) that the UK would purchase at least twelve F-35A dual-capable aircraft and join NATO’s nuclear sharing mission—the first UK air-delivered nuclear role since 1998. The UK government has not confirmed or denied whether the B61-12 nuclear gravity bombs these F-35s could be armed with are on [UK soil](#).

Elsewhere, the UK’s submarine-based nuclear arsenal is facing a demanding transition. The four-boat Dreadnought class, expected to enter service from the early 2030s at a capital cost [reported](#) to run as high as £41 billion, will succeed the ageing Vanguard-class submarines.

The Vanguard subs are being pushed harder than at any point in the programme’s history: patrols have grown from an historic norm of around 90 days to six months or more, with the most recent patrol setting a record of 205 days at sea. Both the [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament](#) and naval [commentators](#) have described this lengthening as a symptom of a fleet under sustained pressure ahead of the Dreadnought handover.

The 2026 [Defence Investment Plan](#) confirmed £63 billion will be spent over the four years to 2029 to ensure the UK can maintain continuous at-sea deterrence; and for the Dreadnought and SSN-AUKUS submarine builds, alongside £13 billion covering both sustainment of the existing Mk4A (Holbrook) warhead and design of its replacement, Astraea (A21/Mk7). This spending is underpinned by the £15 billion committed to the sovereign warhead programme in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review.

The [House of Commons Library](#) explains that total forecast nuclear spending across the Defence Equipment Plan to 2033 is £128 billion, £10 billion higher than the previous forecast, with in-service

nuclear costs historically running at around 6% of the defence budget. Ministers have declined to disclose Astraeva's projected cost specifically, Defence Minister [Luke Pollard](#) telling Parliament in October 2025 that it is being withheld "for the purpose of safeguarding our national security."

The scale of this spending has prompted new scrutiny arrangements. The government [announced](#) in June 2026 ([confirmed](#) in September) that it is establishing a new House of Commons-only Committee, appointed by the Prime Minister, to scrutinise Defence Nuclear Enterprise (DNE) expenditure and programmes. According to the Ministry of Defence, the DNE [spent](#) £12 billion in 2025/26, is projected to "spend over £100 billion through UK suppliers over the next ten years", and now "operates under a ring-fenced budget with greater delegated spending authority than before".

Important questions remain regarding the new Committee on the DNE, for example, concerning whether the government will:

- set out what proportion of the Committee's reports, evidence and recommendations it expects to be published, and on what criteria material will be withheld;
- confirm whether the Committee will report to Parliament, or only to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence, and who will decide its membership;
- explain how the Committee's work will be made available to the National Audit Office, existing select committees and the wider House, and whether the House will have an opportunity to debate DNE expenditure each year;
- consider the inclusion of Members of the House of Lords; and
- publish the draft terms of reference and consult Parliament, and interested organisations, before the Committee is established.

4. Background reading

On Europe / NATO

- [French Presidency](#), Visit to the Île Longue Operational Base
- John Leicester, [AP News](#), France's nukes and Europe's worries about Trump in spotlight as Macron heads to top-secret sub base
- Grégoire Roos, [Chatham House](#), Macron's nuclear weapons offer to Europe: Gaullist policy, updated for a more unstable world
- [UK Government](#), Northwood Declaration (UK-France joint nuclear statement)
- [Reuters](#), Poland does not want nuclear warheads on its territory, deputy defence minister says
- Amelie Jaques-Apke and Lily Wojtowicz, [War on the Rocks](#), Macron's Nuclear Gamble: Building a European Deterrent Faster Than French Politics Can Tear It Down
- Claudia Ciobanu, Sam McNeil, Konstantin Toropin, [AP News](#), Poland and Lithuania confirm exploring a bigger role in nuclear deterrence
- [France24](#), Norway becomes ninth country to come under French nuclear deterrence scheme

- [IISS](#), The Northwood Declaration: UK–France nuclear cooperation and a new European strategic backstop
- Joe Cirincione, [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#), Pentagon's secret plan: Reviving Cold War doctrines to lower the threshold for nuclear war
- [SIPRI](#), Increasing focus on nuclear weapons amid heightened escalation risks

On the UK

- [UK Ministry of Defence](#), Defence Nuclear Enterprise- 2026 Annual Update to Parliament
- Luke Pollard, [UK Parliament](#), Nuclear Weapons: Costs
- Charles Clover, [Financial Times](#), The growing cost to the UK of the nuclear deterrent
- Matt Precey, [BBC](#), Call for government 'transparency' on nuclear bombs
- Claire Mills and Esme Kirk-Wade, [House of Commons Library](#), The cost of the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent
- Steve Barwick, [The Guardian](#), Britain's defence spending plans need greater scrutiny
- Tim Street, [Nuclear Education Trust](#), Stepping Back from the Brink: The Myths of Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Limited Nuclear War
- [House of Lords](#), International Relations and Defence Committee, Ukraine: A Wake-Up Call
- Claire Mills, [House of Commons Library](#), Nuclear Weapons in Europe
- [CND](#), Under Pressure Starmer Welcomes Nuclear Sub From Longest-Ever Patrol
- [Navy Lookout](#), Royal Navy nuclear submarine completes longest patrol on record
- [Cabinet Office](#), Parliamentary scrutiny of the Defence Nuclear Enterprise
- [Prime Minister's Office](#), UK to purchase F-35As and join NATO nuclear mission as Government steps up national security and delivers defence dividend
- [Ministry of Defence](#), 2025 Strategic Defence Review

BRIEFING PREPARED BY DR TIM STREET AND STEVE BARWICK (SECRETARIAT OF THE FORUM)

The summary of the first and second meetings of the Forum are available [here](#) and [here](#).