



Bridging the Channel: The UK's nuclear deterrent and its role in European security

by Ian Bond, 18 November 2021

For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the UK plans to increase its nuclear warhead stockpile. Britain's nuclear weapons have for decades been intended to defend its NATO allies as well as itself, but not all the UK's allies now see its policy as credible. In this new Centre for European Reform policy brief, [Bridging the Channel: The UK's nuclear deterrent and its role in European security](#), kindly supported by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Ian Bond argues that the UK needs to do a better job of explaining how the UK's nuclear deterrent fits into the current security picture in Europe.

The UK has to deal with different audiences in different countries:

- ★ Some of the countries that feel most threatened by Russia are worried by cuts in the UK's conventional land forces, and question whether a country that only commits 1000 or so troops to defending NATO's eastern borders is serious about using nuclear weapons in their defence if deterrence breaks down.
- ★ In many parts of Western Europe, and especially in Germany, arms control is seen as more important than deterrence, and the UK's planned nuclear stockpile increase is an unwelcome reminder of the role of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy.
- ★ France and the UK share some nuclear weapons research facilities, but France's nuclear weapons are not committed to NATO. Even so, as Europe's two nuclear powers, they have similar interests in ensuring that both allies and adversaries see their nuclear deterrent forces as politically and militarily credible.
- ★ The UK (and many of its allies) are concerned that President Joe Biden wants to limit the role of US nuclear forces to deterring or retaliating against nuclear attack – potentially giving an adversary the impression that it could launch a conventional attack without risking a nuclear response. The allies are trying to persuade the US to stick to its current nuclear doctrine.

This new paper argues that the UK should leverage its deterrent to strengthen security relations with its European partners. It should revitalise bilateral nuclear co-operation with France, especially if the US decides to reduce the role of its own deterrent; focus German attention on the cuts that Britain has made in its nuclear stockpile since the end of the Cold War; and ensure that its Central European and Baltic allies believe in its nuclear commitment to them.

The author of the paper, Ian Bond, said: *“Deterrence depends on adversaries believing in the UK’s readiness to use its nuclear weapons if deterrence breaks down. But NATO’s survival depends on allies believing that others will fulfil their obligations in all circumstances. The UK needs to do a better job of persuading allies that it means what it says about committing its nuclear deterrent to protect them”.*

Note for editors:

For further information on the new research and to request an interview with Ian Bond [@CER_IanBond](#), please contact Rosie Giorgi in the CER press office on pressoffice@cer.eu or +44 (0) 20 7233 1199.

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