

# Framing the Bomb: media representations, public perceptions and the future of nuclear weapons in the United Kingdom

By Rhys Crilley

**W**hat is the public perception of nuclear weapons in the UK? And what is the role of the media in shaping this perception? This article examines these questions in the context of the ‘Third Nuclear Age’: a new era of multipolarity, increasing tensions, emerging technologies, and the collapse of longstanding arms control agreements. I begin by placing representations of, and attitudes towards, nuclear deterrence and disarmament within today’s broader political communication landscape. I then examine several illustrative examples of how nuclear weapons are represented in the UK, before examining recent British public opinion about nuclear weapons. I argue that the public understanding of nuclear weapons in the UK is not static or singular but shaped by dynamic, contested narratives that circulate through policy discourse, traditional and digital media, and popular culture. Drawing on framing theory, discourse analysis, and recent public opinion data, I examine how media representations as well as public perceptions and emotions shape what nuclear futures are imagined as possible for the UK in the Third Nuclear Age.

**Keywords:** nuclear weapons; Third Nuclear Age; nuclear disarmament

## Introduction

We live in a time of global disruption. The motto of ‘move fast and break things’ – once the preserve of Silicon Valley ‘tech bros’ – now seems to be the defining principle of US foreign policy. Tariffs, trade wars, and dramatic changes in the American approach to key contemporary international issues – such as Russia’s war in Ukraine or Israel’s use of force against Iran – shock the global system and render confusion amongst states, the public, and experts alike. No area of international politics is safe from this shock and uncertainty, and nowhere is this radical disruption having more significant impact than in the field of nuclear politics.<sup>1</sup>

Following the Trump administration’s actions in early 2025, including their temporary pivot away from supporting Ukraine and chastisement of NATO and EU member states for relying too much on the US for their own defence, policy discourse, media debate and public perception of nuclear weapons is in a state of flux. This instability has also been cultivated by a surrounding lack of clarity about whether longstanding allies can rely on American nuclear weapons to provide them with a ‘nuclear umbrella’ and an idea of ‘extended deterrence’ to support them (Fayet et al. 2025: 123; Egeland 2025: 45–48).

In recent months, for example, there has been a distinct shift in potential nuclear policy ideas posed in public. Robert E. Kelly (2025), an expert on South Korea who once went viral when his children gate-crashed an interview with the BBC, has penned an article with his colleague Min-Hyung Kim that South Korea

“should go nuclear” and develop their own nuclear weapons. James Cameron (2025), an expert on Cold War history based at the University of Oslo, has argued that Europe needs its own nuclear deterrent and that “an Anglo-French ‘Eurodeterrent’ is the best [nuclear policy] option for Europe.” James Rogers and Marc De Vore (2025), political analysts at the Council on Geostrategy, have called for the UK to develop their own tactical nuclear weapons, arguing that “nothing deters (or reassures) like nuclear forces, especially when they provide flexibility in terms of response” and that other policy options “to boost deterrence” such as cyber-attacks “lack the aura of extreme violence”. All of these proposals would mark significant shifts in contemporary nuclear politics; some of these proposals would stretch, and even breach, international law and longstanding treaty obligations. There is also little evidence that these policies would contribute clearly to enhancing global security. Yet despite this, these arguments have been made by respected figures in the field of nuclear policy and security studies, and have gained traction in several media outlets, thereby illustrating that in the new era of nuclear policy, pretty much all options are on the table. Indeed, whilst South Korea has not yet gone nuclear, on 10 July 2025 the UK and France signed the Northwood Declaration and agreed to coordinate their nuclear planning in the face of extreme threats to Europe. As of June 2025, the UK’s announced purchase of F-35A fighter jets will give the UK tactical nuclear weapons capabilities (though those weapons will have to be loaned from the US). Nuclear policies are shifting across the planet, and ideas that were on the fringes only a few months ago are now being implemented as national policy. This new era of nuclear policy is often referred to as the ‘Third Nuclear Age’ (Futter / Zala 2021: 251; Crilley 2023: 1). The First Nuclear Age was defined by bipolar superpower competition between the USA and USSR during the Cold War. The Second Nuclear Age was characterised by a reduction in nuclear stockpiles but accompanied with fears of nuclear proliferation and terrorism in the post-Cold War era. The Third Nuclear Age, however, now presents unique challenges (Crilley 2023; Futter et al 2025). Beginning with the collapse of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, the Third Nuclear Age is characterised by the collapse of nuclear arms control agreements, the rise of multipolarity, the emergence of disruptive new technologies, and increasing global tensions, as well as adversarial relations between, and open conflicts involving, nuclear weapon states.

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In this new era, every nuclear weapon state – including the United Kingdom – is either modernising or increasing their nuclear arsenals. Amidst this context of global disruption, the collapse of arms control, and the stalling of movement towards disarmament (alongside the increasing risks of nuclear use), it is important to understand how nuclear policies are both claimed to be legitimate and perceived to be ‘legitimate’ or not by others.<sup>2</sup> This is because changes to nuclear policy – whether they are moves towards building more nuclear weapons or moves towards disarmament and abolition – can only occur when state leaders and policymakers perceive those changes to be worthwhile and can convince an audience (of fellow elites and/or the public) that those changes are legitimate (Reus-Smit 2007: 159-160). So, what do the British public think about nuclear weapons in our current moment? Do they perceive them to be legitimate or not? And what role does the media play in shaping these views? Moreover, how are narratives about nuclear weapons in the UK changing amidst the context of the Third Nuclear Age? And what does this all mean for the future of nuclear disarmament?

These questions guide the subsequent analysis that draws upon content and discourse analysis of government and media sources as well as overviews of academic literature and public opinion data. This article is structured as follows: the next section elaborates on the concept of the Third Nuclear Age and explains how and why political communication matters in the field of nuclear politics today. I then examine media representations and public perceptions of nuclear weapons in the UK, before placing this in a global context. Finally, I outline what my analysis suggests for the future of nuclear disarmament and global security.

### **The Third Nuclear Age and the politics of communication**

The Third Nuclear Age is one of profound material changes – new delivery systems and weapons technologies, more nuclear weapons, and increasing conflicts between and involving nuclear weapon states – but also profound shifts in the ways nuclear weapons are represented, discussed, and understood. Today, as in the past, political communication is not peripheral to nuclear politics; rather, it is central to its construction, legitimation, and contestation (see Cohn 1987: 690; Taylor 1987: 303).

The collapse of the INF Treaty in August 2019 is a good starting point for understanding the dawn of the Third Nuclear Age (Crimley 2023: 1). On the one hand, it signals a material shift in nuclear politics – the development and deployment of previously prohibited missile systems. On the other, it signals a communicative change – a breakdown in communication and cooperation between the two largest nuclear powers, as well as new communications from these states explaining how new nuclear weapon delivery systems are supposedly essential for them to ensure their own security. Other events since 2019 illustrate the increasingly unstable communicative landscape of nuclear politics. These include, but are not limited to, Russian nuclear threats accompanying its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the hostility of the Trump administration to longstanding allies, calls for nuclear proliferation in countries like South Korea, Japan, Turkey, and in some EU countries such as Poland, alongside the return of open conflict between a nuclear armed India and Pakistan after the Pahalgam attacks, as well as Israel’s recent strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. In Britain too, we have seen the creep of previously abnormal nuclear ideas becoming normalised in policy and press spaces, where calls for British ‘tactical nukes’ are no longer long dead relics from the Cold War archive but are reanimated

like Frankenstein’s monster: as zombie policy options that are now deemed essential for security. The Third Nuclear Age then, is not one of mere technological developments and new geopolitical contexts, but of fundamental debates around meaning and the reality of the world – what security is, who it is for, and how it can best be achieved (Ritchie 2024: 507). Subsequently, how nuclear weapons are represented, framed, and made sense of matters as those representations shape what is considered possible and deemed to be legitimate nuclear policy (Meyer 1995: 190; Pantoliano 2023: 1191).

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Following Derrida’s provocation that the atomic age is “*fabulously textual*” and reliant on “structures of information and communication” (1984: 23, emphasis in original), in the Third Nuclear Age these structures are now even more fragmented. They communicate more information at a faster pace and are more emotionally charged than ever before (Crimley 2024: 142). Digital diplomacy, meme warfare, disinformation, and the erosion of trust in mainstream journalism all contribute to a new media ecology and information environment in which nuclear threats can be, and are, made, joked about, minimised, or mythologised in real time (Crimley 2025: 475). In this chaotic communication environment, framing theory can be a helpful tool to make sense of how the legitimacy of nuclear policies are claimed and constructed. As Robert Entman (1993: 52) argues, framing involves selecting certain aspects of the world and making them more salient in communications in order to achieve specific outcomes. Framing involves stating that: 1) something is a problem; 2) something or someone is a cause of that problem; 3) morally evaluating the problem; 4) proposing a solution and then making a call to action.

Framing theory therefore provides a straightforward way of analysing how the legitimacy of nuclear weapons, arms control, and disarmament is communicated and contested. For example, when British media report on Britain’s Trident nuclear weapons programme, referring to it not as a weapon of mass destruction but as “vital to our national security,” they are doing more than describing government policy – they are representing nuclear weapons as legitimate and endorsing ideas such as nuclear deterrence. And when supporters of nuclear disarmament are portrayed as naïve, unpatriotic, and unrealistic – as was often the case with prominent politicians who supported nuclear abolition such as Nicola Sturgeon or Jeremy Corbyn – this too can be understood through framing; namely, as a situation in which dissent is dismissed and disciplined, and alternative nuclear imaginaries are marginalised, as a future without nuclear weapons is generally portrayed as inconceivable (see Pelopidas 2021: 485). Both of these framings are underpinned by divergent logics of nuclear weapons as 1) a guarantor of national security and 2) as a threat to human and planetary security. They also rely upon different representations of a problem, causes of that problem, moral evaluations, and different proposed solutions and calls to action.

The dynamic between government policy, media representations, and public perceptions of nuclear weapons is neither linear nor neutral, but it is clear that government framings do influence media framings which then influence public perceptions. In the UK, the dominant framing of nuclear weapons has long emphasised

necessity, strength, deterrence, and exceptionalism. Britain may no longer have a global empire, but it still has Trident – or so the narrative goes. And in this narrative, ‘our’ [that is British] nuclear weapons are not weapons of mass destruction that pose a risk of global annihilation; instead they are guarantors of ‘our’ security, and a highly valuable symbol of prestige that supports the British economy, shapes British national identity, and grants Britain influence, whilst also deterring adversaries and thereby having operational military value to the UK (Ritchie 2013: 155-159).

This framing and these underpinning values may be hegemonic across the British nuclear weapons debate, but they do not go unchallenged. Counter-narratives exist, and they matter as they contest the legitimacy of nuclear weapons and deterrence and offer alternative conceptions of what security is and can be (Alexis-Martin 2019: 4; Considine 2019: 1090; McDowell 2023: 185-204). Mass movements, activist advocacy, cultural representations, and online communities have all challenged the legitimacy of nuclear weapons in the UK and beyond in myriad ways (Hill 2018; Hogg 2016: 174). Alongside mass protest in the early 1980s, TV films and series like *Threads* and *The Day After* pushed the public and policymakers to recognise the catastrophic consequences of potential nuclear use, and to push for disarmament. More recently, reanimated fears of nuclear accidents and radioactive disaster have returned for a new generation who may have seen the Oscar winning *Oppenheimer* movie, the *Chernobyl* or *Fallout* TV shows, or have read Annie Jacobsen’s best-selling book *Nuclear War: A Scenario* (2024). In different ways, these cultural texts perform a crucial communicative function: they render the invisible visible, the abstract tangible, and transform nuclear policy from something which is often posed as highly technical and bureaucratic into something that is horrifyingly real and relevant to the public. Popular culture can essentially do what official policy papers do not. It can make many people interested in, and worried about, nuclear weapons (for recent interventions that eloquently and convincingly demonstrate how popular culture matters in nuclear politics see Pantoliano 2025; Faux 2024; Faux / Pullen 2025; Taha 2022; Hogue / Maurer 2022).

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Emotions are central across all these sites of political communication in the Third Nuclear Age, including policy, the press, and pop culture. Following Sara Ahmed’s (2004) theory of “affective economies”, we must consider not just how nuclear weapons are framed in language and other forms of representation, but how they circulate affectively – how they are bound up with invocations of certain emotions and how they become objects of fear, fascination, pride, safety, terror, and apathy. In Britain, public opinion on nuclear weapons is not static, but fluctuates in response to geopolitical events, government statements, media and cultural narratives, and moral appeals made by supporters of disarmament and abolition. In drawing attention to the role that emotions play in nuclear politics by constraining and enabling certain policies, one opens up their analysis beyond a mere question of ‘does the British public support Trident?’ Rather, we ask what Trident means to people, which emotions that meaning provokes, and what political possibilities those representations and feelings make possible.

As such, political communication in the Third Nuclear Age is not simply about message transmission, it is about cultural production, media content, public perceptions, and emotions in a digital age where anyone can comment, share, remix, regurgitate, or challenge what media they view online. It is about who gets to define the terms of debate on nuclear policy, who speaks out the loudest, who is heard and who is silenced, what gets amplified and what gets ignored. As the claiming and granting of legitimacy is crucial to any serious policy shift – whether towards disarmament or further armament – the narratives we craft, consume, and share about nuclear weapons shape which futures are imaginable, and which remain foreclosed (Pelopidas 2021). Therefore, to understand contemporary nuclear politics in the UK and beyond we should look at the realm of high technology, elite posturing and inaction, and geopolitical contests, but we must also move beyond the realm of warheads and letters of last resort. We must also examine the metaphors that normalise nuclear weapons, the news headlines that frame them, the TV scripts that allude to them, and the TikTok videos that challenge them. It is through these communicative acts that the bomb is not just represented but made real to the majority of people.

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### The media and the Bomb in Britain

In the UK, nuclear weapons materially exist in submarines under the sea setting out from the Faslane naval base in Scotland, but they also exist socially as representations in culture, media and public imaginaries. British news media have long played a central role in shaping public perceptions about the bomb (Hogg 2016: 2), and in the Third Nuclear Age that role has become more complex, fragmented, and ideologically fraught. However, if we return to Entman’s understanding of framing we can see that the dominant media frame of nuclear weapons in the UK has remained largely consistent since the dawn of the atomic age. This largely follows the UK government’s own framing of nuclear weapons: that 1) the problem of global instability and a ‘dangerous security environment’ (either of the Cold War era or our current global malaise) is; 2) caused by adversaries that threaten the UK, some of whom possess or want to possess nuclear weapons, therefore; 3) the UK needs to possess nuclear weapons in order to ‘deter’ adversaries from attacking the UK; and 4) the moral evaluation is that the UK is a responsible nuclear weapon state that possesses nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes.

This frame played out in the British press during the Cold War. Here, traditional media, particularly tabloid and broadsheet newspapers and the BBC, tended to represent nuclear weapons through the lens of national security and deterrence theory, claiming it was “essential for the maintenance of great-power status” (Bingham 2013: 609). Critical coverage of nuclear weapons was censored, such as the BBC’s censoring of the 1966 *The War Game* documentary that depicted the aftermath of a nuclear war in Britain. Those who supported disarmament, when they were even acknowledged, were framed as radical or unrealistic. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), with its iconic peace symbol and mass marches and mobilisations, was often covered with an air of suspicion, its supporters depicted as either naïve idealists or, worse, as stooges for Soviet influence – see, for example, the letters published in the British press and authored by the Rt Hon

Sir Julian Lewis MP in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s (Lewis 2025). Fast-forward to the present day and the tropes remain eerily familiar. Coverage of the UK's nuclear arsenal is still underpinned by notions of national prestige, deterrent necessity, and alliance solidarity: aspects that have all been brought to the fore in the early days of the second Trump administration. The likes of *The Guardian* may occasionally platform dissenting voices, but across the British press – particularly in outlets like *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Sun* or *The Daily Mail* – the bomb is routinely framed as common sense, necessary, and 'A Good Thing'. According to this framing, the bomb will "ensure vital protection for the UK and NATO allies" and stand as a badge of global relevance in a world where Brexit and a changing economic order has undermined Britain's former imperial status as a world leading power. This discursive representation is significant. As I have argued elsewhere, nuclear weapons policies "are made intelligible and possible through broader cultural repertoires of meaning" (Crilly 2023: 3). In Britain, one significant idea is that nuclear weapons are key to helping the country maintain its status as world leader even though it is no longer one of the world's largest economies or military powers. The bomb soothes a sense of post-imperial anxiety. Trident is not just a weapon that deters aggression, but it is a status symbol in a changed and changing global order – it is a prosthetic for a lost empire and a roar for a lion long dead. To question Britain's continued deployment and development of nuclear weapons, therefore, is to question Britain's status, prestige, and place in the world (see Ritchie 2013).

Yet, as the global media ecology has evolved from one of traditional, print and broadcast 'one-to-many media', to one of participatory 'many-to-many social media', so too have the mediums and ways in which representations and public perceptions of nuclear weapons changed. In the fragmented digital ecology of the Third Nuclear Age, nuclear discourse is no longer simply dominated by an orthodox framing that runs from the government through the *BBC* and *The Times*, but it is shaped via alternative media outlets, podcasts with millions of listeners, Facebook posts, Instagram stories, TikTok shorts, Reddit debates, and long-form YouTube videos. This shift has both disrupted and reinforced hegemonic discourses of nuclear weapons. On the one hand, digital platforms have enabled civil society, effected communities, disarmament supporters, academics, and younger activists to challenge the logic of deterrence in novel, creative ways – through personable viral videos, infographics, satire, and memes. On the other, the algorithmic structures of virality on platforms owned by Silicon Valley's biggest tech bros like Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg often amplify nationalist rhetoric and military spectacle. They (overly) simplify 'Us' versus 'Them' narratives that bolster support for nuclear weapons, where a good guy with a big bomb is supposedly the only way to stop a bad guy with a big bomb.

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The UK's 2016 Trident renewal vote is a case in point here. The parliamentary debate and vote represented a significant moment in nuclear politics – but media coverage focused less on the substantive issues of deterrence theory, legality under international law, or potential financial, humanitarian, and environmental costs, and much more on political theatre. Traditional British media outlets framed the vote as a loyalty test: are you serious

about national security, or are you a naïve pacifist? Around the time of the vote *The Sun* ran front pages with a photoshopped Jeremy Corbyn as a nuclear missile with the headline "off his war head", and others that accused him of being "the most dangerous chicken in Britain", as well as telling Brits "don't chuck Britain in the Cor-Bin" because of his "nuclear surrender" (Hawkes 2016). The BBC's coverage, though more measured, echoed the same binary – treating disarmament as a fringe position rather than a possible policy alternative, not to mention the position that the UK is actually legally obliged to pursue under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This representation matters because media representations shape not just what people know about nuclear weapons, but also the possible responses to them. Problematically, media representations of nuclear weapons often contribute to what experts refer to as "nuclear eternity" – the idea that it is impossible to imagine a future without nuclear weapons (Pelopidas 2021: 484). In Britain, our imaginations of nuclear futures have been disciplined into acquiesce to deterrence theory and the maintenance and, more recently, the expansion of nuclear arsenals. Rarely do we hear about the humanitarian impact of actual and potential nuclear use or the lived realities of those affected by British nuclear testing (such as veterans or indigenous populations in Australia and the Pacific where Britain detonated 45 nuclear weapons), not to mention the ecological consequences of maintaining a nuclear-armed and nuclear-fuelled submarine fleet that produces nuclear waste. These are the realities that are missing, marginal, and marginalised by dominant discussions of nuclear weapons and deterrence theory in the UK. They are overshadowed by coverage that frames nuclear weapons as abstract, elite-level concerns that ensure 'national security'.

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However, cracks in the status quo are visible. In Scotland, for example, elite views, public opinion, and media frames around Trident are markedly different (Ritchie 2017). Scottish newspapers such as *The National* often give voice to anti-nuclear sentiment. These were the only major UK newspaper to publish daily reports from the 2025 meeting of states parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. They amplify SNP and Scottish activists' critiques of Westminster's nuclear commitment and highlight that the presence of nuclear submarines on the Clyde makes Scotland a potential site for nuclear accidents or attacks in the event of war. Here, the bomb is less a symbol of national pride and prestige – it is a dangerous existential risk foisted upon communities with little to no say in nuclear decision-making. Indeed, polling has shown that there is much less support for the renewal and modernisation of Trident amongst the Scottish public, although this has changed following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (YouGov 2025). Moreover, alternative media such as *Novara* and *Tortoise Media* are increasing their reach across the UK, covering nuclear weapon issues from a perspective that questions whether they do provide the security they are supposed to. In

these more critical representations, nuclear weapons are no longer the major protector of the British population but the provocation that threatens it, as ‘our’ deterrent becomes an inherent danger. What emerges from our current media ecology in the UK then, is not a monolithic discourse but a tension between continuity and rupture. Dominant media in the UK continue to frame nuclear weapons in line with government policy – as a necessary and noble endeavour. However social media, alternative media outlets, and regional media (especially in Scotland) complicate the picture. The British media, in short, are both mouthpieces of nuclear orthodoxy and platforms for nuclear protestation. They are battlegrounds of nuclear meaning that help construct the conditions of possibility for nuclear politics (Crilley 2023: 43). In the Third Nuclear Age, understanding how the media frame the bomb, arms control, and disarmament is essential to understanding what the future of UK and global nuclear policy could be. Moreover, we must understand what the public actually think and feel about the representations that they are exposed to and engage with.

### **British public opinion on nuclear weapons**

If nuclear politics in the Third Nuclear Age concerns representations, perceptions and contestations around legitimacy, then public opinion becomes an important site of analysis. Indeed, a range of studies have examined the significance of public opinion in nuclear politics in recent years (see Sagan / Valentino 2017; Dill et al. 2022; Rosendorf et al. 2023). Yet the findings of these studies challenge, contest, and contradict each other. While some find that most people would be willing to use nuclear weapons against certain adversaries (Dill et al. 2022), others find that majorities of people believe it is never acceptable to use nuclear weapons (Pelopidas / Egeland 2020). Despite seemingly more and more surveys about nuclear policy and elite versus public preferences being published every year, we still lack a definitive understanding of what people across the planet think about nuclear weapons. This is because there is no single definitive public opinion about nuclear weapons that spans time and space. A recent study has found that the public themselves hold contradictory views about nuclear weapons that pivot between and entangle preferences towards both deterrence and disarmament (Sukin et al. 2025). As Benoît Pelopidas and Kjølv Egeland (2023: 189) remind us, “different survey techniques, such as polls, vignette-based experiments, and extensive questionnaires, tap into disparate layers of opinion – each of which is ‘real’ in their own way and of analytical value depending on the research question being asked”.

Indeed, despite the existential stakes of nuclear weapons issues, British public opinion on nuclear weapons remains unclear, fragmented, and under-theorised. Historically, the British public’s support for the renewal of Trident hovered around 35% but it has since risen to around 45% following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (YouGov 2025). One study recently found that 65% of the British public believe that Britain’s nuclear weapons make them feel safe (McKeon 2023), but other studies conducted in the same year have found that only 40% of the British public support the UK possessing nuclear weapons, and have noted markable differences in support in terms of gender and age. Women and young people, for example, are far more likely to oppose the possession of nuclear weapons (Street et al. 2023). Moreover, a recent study of European public opinion on nuclear weapons has found that approximately 50% of British respondents replied that nuclear weapons do not make them feel safe (Pelopidas 2025).

The complexity and inconsistency of British public opinion on nuclear weapons can be partly explained by the insights from one recent examination of global public opinion on nuclear weapons. Lauren Sukin, J. Luis Rodriguez, and Stephen Herzog found that of those surveyed in the UK, 36% support increasing the size of the UK’s nuclear arsenal (Sukin et al. 2025: 30) and 72% would wish to support the US in using nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack on an ally (Sukin et al. 2025: 37). However, when asked if they support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 71% of UK respondents said that they did so (Sukin et al. 2025: 29) and 74% said that the use of nuclear weapons can never be morally justified (Sukin et al. 2025: 35). As the authors of this study suggest, members of the public in the UK (and across the globe) have views that entangle both support for nuclear deterrence and support for nuclear disarmament whereby across public opinion there is “a malleability and contingency that negates binary, categorical approaches to nuclear politics” (Sukin et al. 2025: 38). The British public simultaneously supports divergent approaches to nuclear weapons whereby deterrence and disarmament are both understood to be appropriate policy. Public opinion in the UK then, is more complex than a simple binary between those who support nuclear disarmament and those who support deterrence.

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Understanding this complexity requires an insight into public opinion polls, but it also requires going beyond the numbers to explore the affective, cultural, and discursive forces that shape how the bomb is made sense of, understood, and thought of by people across the planet and in the UK. Public opinion is not a static reservoir of views but a dynamic, discursively mediated process. As Daniel and Musgrave (2017) remind us, the public does not form opinions in a vacuum – they do so within complex milieus of meaning shaped by elite messaging, media frames, pop culture, cultural norms, affective registers, and moments of crisis and rupture. In the Third Nuclear Age, public perceptions of nuclear weapons are in flux and rapidly changing as novel, unpredictable developments and disruption become the defining features of our times.

The challenge for people who wish to reduce the risk of nuclear catastrophe and avoid the extinction of the planet is to reframe the debate, not just with insights into facts and figures, but with compelling narratives that connect to people in an emotionally driven, ethical way. These narratives must communicate that arms control and disarmament can serve as a strategy to ease tension, reduce risks, and improve security. This is particularly pressing now, when elite debates around the future of national nuclear policies are returning to Cold War ideas like increasing nuclear arsenals, proliferating nuclear weapons to more states, and reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons to the UK’s arsenal. Without a countervailing discourse grounded in humanitarian, ecological, and democratic values, these zombie ideas risk becoming normalised and enacted by an elite that time and time again proves itself to be out of touch with what the average citizen actually needs to live a safe, secure, stable, and happy life in the UK and elsewhere.

The Third Nuclear Age is not just a series of interlinked security crises, it is fundamentally a crisis of imagination.

Ultimately, the legitimacy of nuclear weapons in Britain rests on contested terrain. While many people continue to accept them as part of the national security architecture, this acceptance is neither unanimous nor immutable. Public opinion can, and does, shift. If we are to imagine a different nuclear future, we must take seriously the communicative and affective landscapes in which public attitudes are formed. Nuclear legitimacy is continuously constructed, but also contested, through communication and culture. Surveys suggest that public perceptions differ depending on nationality, age, gender, race, class, education, and so on. What is seen as common sense to the old, white, male security establishment in Paris, is provocative and ridiculous to the young women of Mexico City, and what is justified in the halls of Westminster in London is rejected by those on the streets in Glasgow. These divergent perceptions and the aforementioned tensions in public opinion challenge the idea of nuclear deterrence as a universal logic that holds true and is widely accepted across the planet. This has implications for both public engagement and disarmament. If nuclear weapons are not simply tools of strategy, deterrence, and war, but central facets of national identity, then changing nuclear policy requires more than treaty agreements, technical fixes and elite negotiations (though of course, these are incredibly important). It requires shifting narratives and feelings about big ideas like security and how to achieve it, and it requires engaging with diverse audiences in ways tailored for them. In this light, the Third Nuclear Age is not just a series of interlinked security crises, it is fundamentally a crisis of imagination. To navigate out of our current crises we must begin by imagining our world and nuclear weapons differently.

### **Imagining, communicating, and making nuclear disarmament**

At the 2025 NATO summit in June 2025 the UK committed to increase defence spending to 5% of GDP by 2035 (a dramatic rise given that in 2024 the UK spent 2.3% of GDP on defence). This commitment followed the 2025 Strategic Defence Review which places “at the heart of our investment [...] our total commitment to operate, sustain, and renew our nuclear deterrent” (Ministry of Defence 2025: 5). It is therefore clear that the United Kingdom remains suspended in what Benoît Pelopidas (2021) calls a state of “nuclear eternity”. This is understood as a condition in which the presence of nuclear weapons is naturalised, their permanence assumed, and their abolition rendered almost unthinkable. This imaginary, crafted through decades of elite discourse, media framing, and cultural representations, disciplines what can be imagined as possible in nuclear policy. In such a world, disarmament is marginalised.

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Recent UK government decisions demonstrate that supporters of disarmament are currently facing an uphill battle. Starmer’s government is no longer simply renewing the UK’s nuclear weapons programme but broadening it. In June 2025, for example, the UK announced that they will now purchase 12 F-35A fighter jets which can carry nuclear weapons in the form of the American B61 gravity bomb. When these planes eventually become

operational, the UK will be able to launch nuclear weapons from the air or the first time since the late 1990s – though those nuclear weapons will have to be loaned from the US and require launch authorisation from leaders in both London and Washington, DC. The previously unlikely idea of British ‘tactical’ nukes and new nuclear delivery systems are now becoming a reality.

Yet the communicative and cultural landscape of the Third Nuclear Age suggests that what seems like the new normal – a nuclear eternity of ever-increasing nuclear armament – may not be total nor immutable, nor set in stone. As I have argued, representations of nuclear weapons in Britain are shaped and reshaped through a complex ecology of state messaging, external events, media framings, popular culture, public moods, and emotional registers. While traditional media outlets continue to echo state narratives of necessity and deterrence, alternative and digital platforms, especially those rooted in humanitarian and youth-led perspectives, challenge these assumptions, offering glimpses of a world beyond the bomb.

In this context, it is perhaps notable that the Strategic Defence Review still recommends that the UK should work to “renew the arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation regime” even as Russia and China are “unwilling partners” (Ministry of Defence 2025: 102). What is even more telling about the nuclear dimension of the Strategic Defence Review is that it recommends that for the UK government to “sustain long-term support for the UK’s nuclear deterrent,” it should develop better mechanisms for parliamentary scrutiny in order “to provide confidence that taxpayer money is being spent wisely”. At the same time, the Strategic Defence Review supports the delivery of a “‘National Endeavour’ public communications campaign that conveys the fundamental importance and necessity of the deterrent” (Ministry of Defence 2025: 102-103). Therefore, the UK government themselves recognise that media representations and public perceptions of nuclear weapons matter, and they are well aware of how significant the battle for hearts and minds is in nuclear politics.

Therefore, amidst the coming campaign to shore up support for the UK’s nuclear weapons programme, proponents of disarmament need to remind the government, the media, and the public that arms control and disarmament can help us in our current crises. It is paramount that we imagine disarmament and a non-nuclear future, and outline how, why, and what it should involve in the context of the Third Nuclear Age. Doing so requires disrupting dominant narratives, reasserting the human and ecological consequences of nuclear weapons possession, and expanding the boundaries of the Overton window (what is and can be considered as realistic).

The Third Nuclear Age will not last forever, and it does not need to end with nuclear war or the perpetual increasing of defence spending and nuclear arsenals. It can, and should, end with disarmament. Communicating disarmament and building support for it requires actions and stories that speak to justice, security, care, and planetary survival. Making disarmament real demands more than treaties and verification mechanisms. It demands a transformation of the communicative, cultural, and emotional infrastructures that sustain nuclear legitimacy. If the Third Nuclear Age is a crisis of imagination as well as geopolitics, then the way forward lies not just in ‘better’ policies, but in better imaginaries that centre disarmament and abolition as an urgent, rational and ethical imperative that refuse the fatalism and foreclosure of nuclear eternity.

## Endnotes

1 This article was written in May 2025, submitted in early June 2025, and revisions were made in mid July 2025. Thus, it may not reflect subsequent developments.

2 Herein I refer to legitimacy rather than legality because legality refers to what complies with the law and legal frameworks, whereas legitimacy refers to a broader socio-political conception of what is understood to be 'right', correct, and fair or just. Following the work of Rodney Barker (in particular, his 2009 book *Legitimizing Identities*) and other prominent theorists of legitimation, I am interested in understanding how political actors make claims that they and the actions they pursue – such as possessing nuclear weapons – are legitimate.

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