

# How Will the Labour Party Shape UK Nuclear Weapons Policy?

**U**K Prime Minister Kier Starmer's Labour Party has signaled its "unshakeable" and "absolute" commitment to nuclear deterrence after sweeping to power in the United Kingdom in July.

After 14 years of Conservative Party-led government, voters handed Starmer's party a landslide victory on par with Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1997. Bolstered by an overwhelming majority of members of Parliament, Labour now has the mandate to make ambitious policy change across government. The public will see what that means for nuclear policy when the Strategic Defence Review is released early in 2025.

The review will be headed by Lord George Robertson, reporting to Defence Minister John Healey. Robertson is a Labour defense policy veteran, having served as defense minister in 1997-1999 before becoming NATO secretary-general in 1999-2003. He will work alongside Fiona Hill, a former U.S. National Security Council official, and Richard Barrons, a retired army general and former commander of the UK Joint Forces Command.

The review must articulate Labour's approach to nuclear weapons policy at a moment of profound international upheaval: the full-scale war against Ukraine waged by Russia; growing violence in the Middle East involving nuclear-armed Israel, which may drive Iran to nuclearize further; ongoing uncertainty about the relationship between China and the West; and growing disquiet about the erosion of the multilateral nonproliferation and disarmament regime. Within this darkening context, how might Labour demonstrate accountable leadership on nuclear weapons policy?

By extending a strong tradition of forward-leaning Labour policy, there are several concrete ways that the new government can demonstrate its commitment to reduce nuclear weapons risks and harms and advance the

multilateral disarmament agenda, while signaling Labour's seriousness about defense and security. To do this, Labour should demonstrate that responsibility, accountability, transparency, and international law are the bedrock principles of the UK nuclear weapons program.

## Progressive Opportunities

The review team should start by revisiting the in-depth introspective work done by the civil service on UK nuclear responsibilities with respect to its nuclear weapons, partners, adversaries, and the wider international community. Working through frameworks such as BASIC's Responsibilities Framework<sup>1</sup> has proven a valuable starting point for building shared understanding across government of UK obligations and duties, and much of this prior work still has relevance.

Yet, the review process also should explore whether the UK can reverse the Prime Minister Boris Johnson-era policy of secrecy and return to publicly releasing numbers on the operational stockpile and deployed warheads and missiles. This move would restore confidence in the UK commitment to the principle of transparency, signal its willingness to contribute responsibly to arms control and disarmament dialogue, and remove

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