



UK Nuclear Weapons: The UK Public Speaks

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Selected data and analysis based upon the November 2012
Perceptions of International Security survey carried out
by Ipsos MORI on behalf of UNA-UK

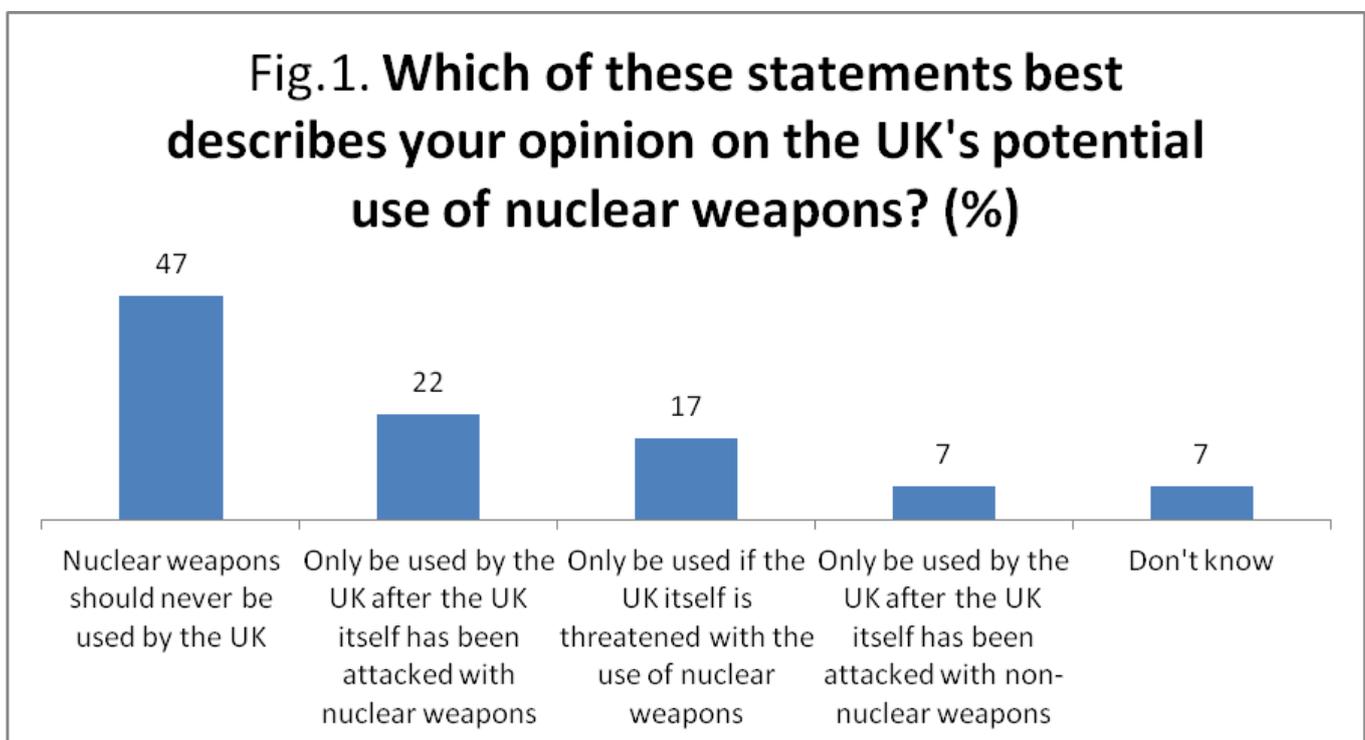


As the UK Government is set to release its *Trident Alternatives Review*, the focus of attention on the UK's nuclear weapons has never been greater, and yet at the same time, the adjustments to be brought about by the review, vis-à-vis Trident replacement, are predicted to be slight at best. The original terms of reference for the study – to “make an assessment of how alternatives could be delivered, the feasibility, cost and industrial implications, level of risk and credibility” – did not leave scope for a discussion outside of these parameters on, for example, the ethics of possession or use.

Beyond work performed by a handful of non-governmental organisations, the UK public has had little opportunity to voice its opinion on the UK's possession or potential use of its nuclear weapons; and certainly it has not had a chance to do so in official fora.

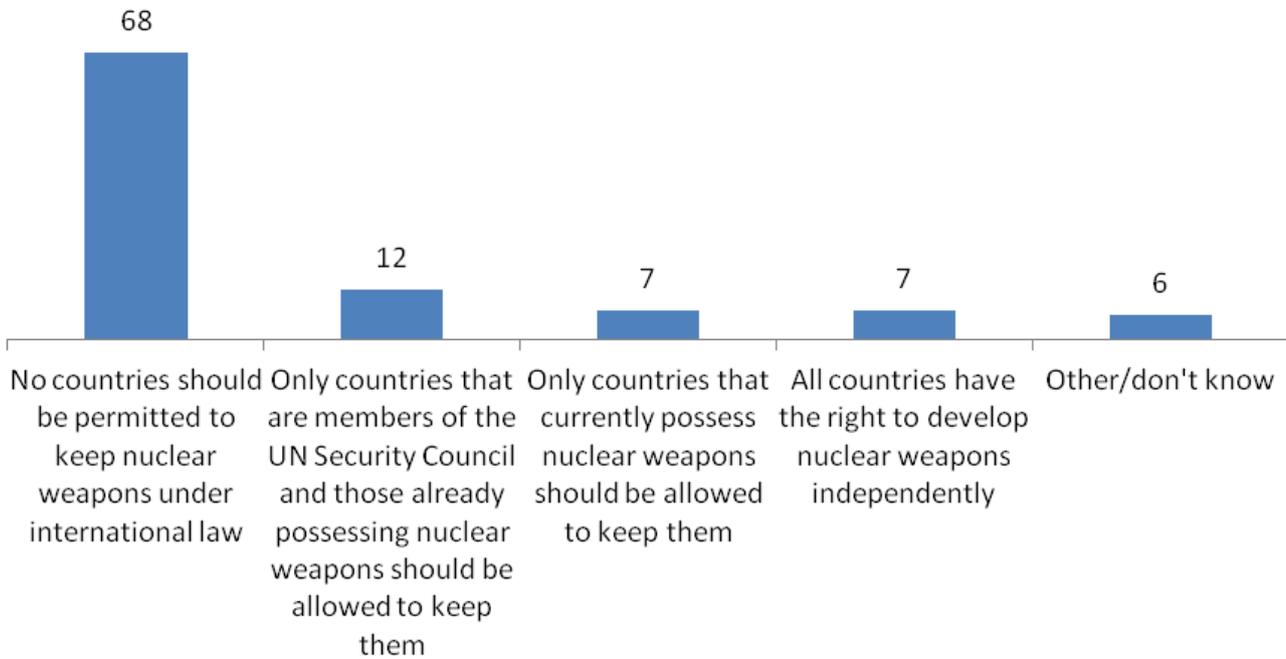
At the end of 2012, UNA-UK commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct a survey of UK public perceptions of international security. 1,053 respondents were selected to be nationally representative of adults (defined as 15 years of age and above), and the resultant data were weighted to ensure a representative sample. A portion of the survey was given over to assessing attitudes towards the UK's potential use of nuclear weapons; the UK's possession of nuclear weapons; and the UK and nuclear disarmament.

In terms of use (Fig. 1), almost half of all adults in the survey (47%) believed that nuclear weapons should *never* be used by the UK, while 22% believed that nuclear weapons should *only* be used by the UK *after* the UK itself has been attacked with similar weapons.



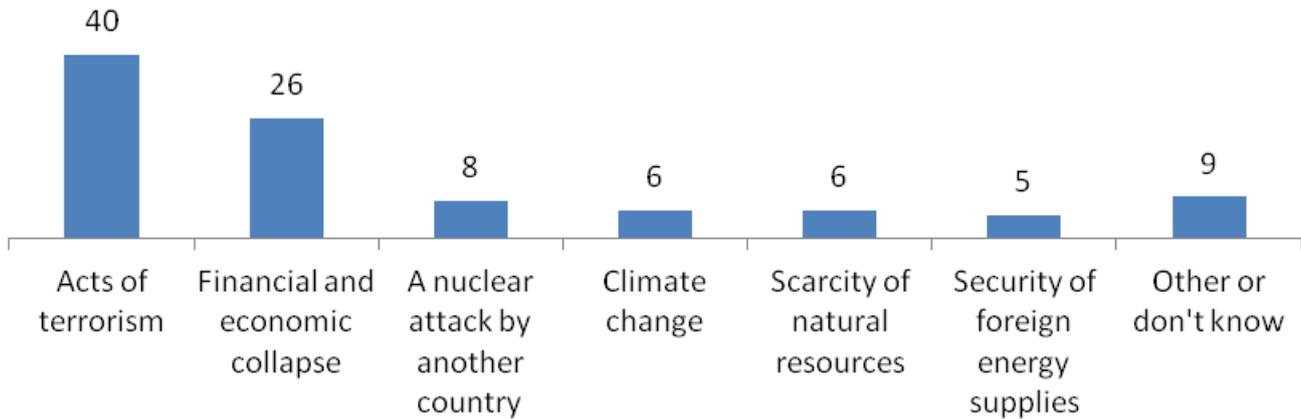
UK public opinion was somewhat more emphatic when asked about the right to possess nuclear weapons, with over two-thirds of all respondents stating that “no countries should be permitted to keep nuclear weapons under international law” (see Fig. 2).

Fig.2. Which one, if any, of these statements best summarises your view on the possession of nuclear weapons? (%)



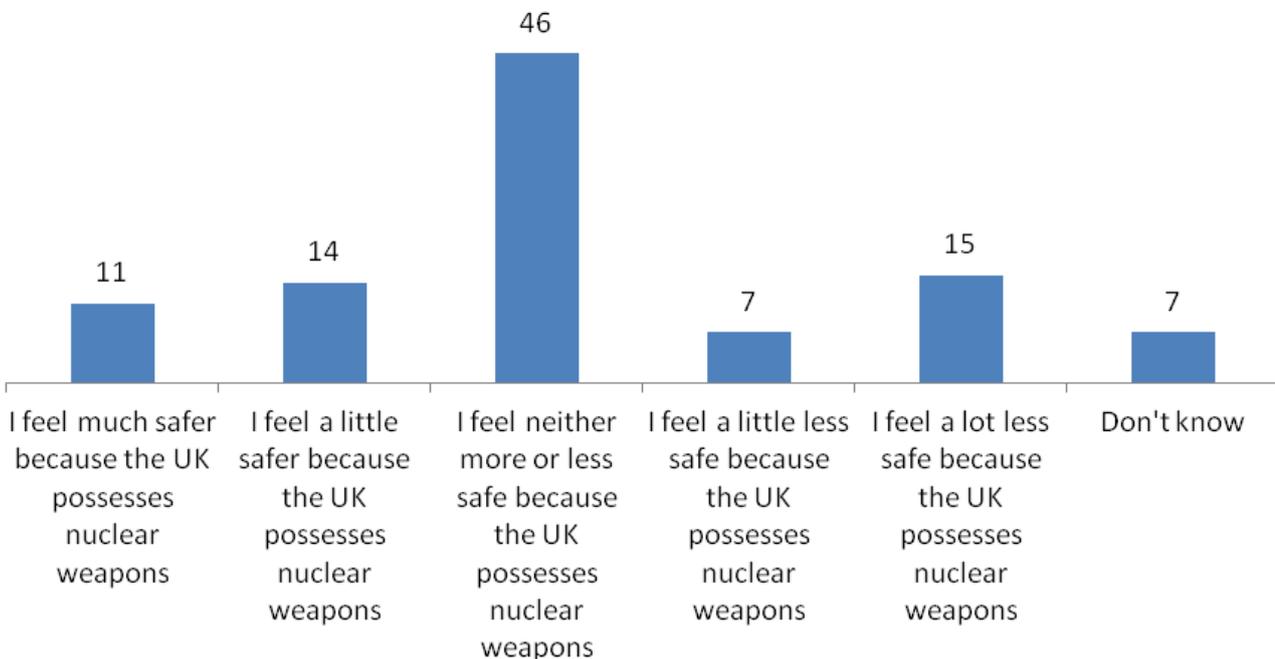
With earlier portions of the survey (see Fig. 3) showing that acts of terrorism (40% of respondents) and financial and economic collapse (26% of respondents) were perceived as “the greatest threat to the UK’s national security between now and 2020” – only 8% stated that “a nuclear attack by another country” represented such a threat – the public was asked about how their sense of security related to the possession of nuclear weapons.

Fig.3. Which one of the following, if any, represents the greatest threat to the UK's national security between now and 2020? (%)

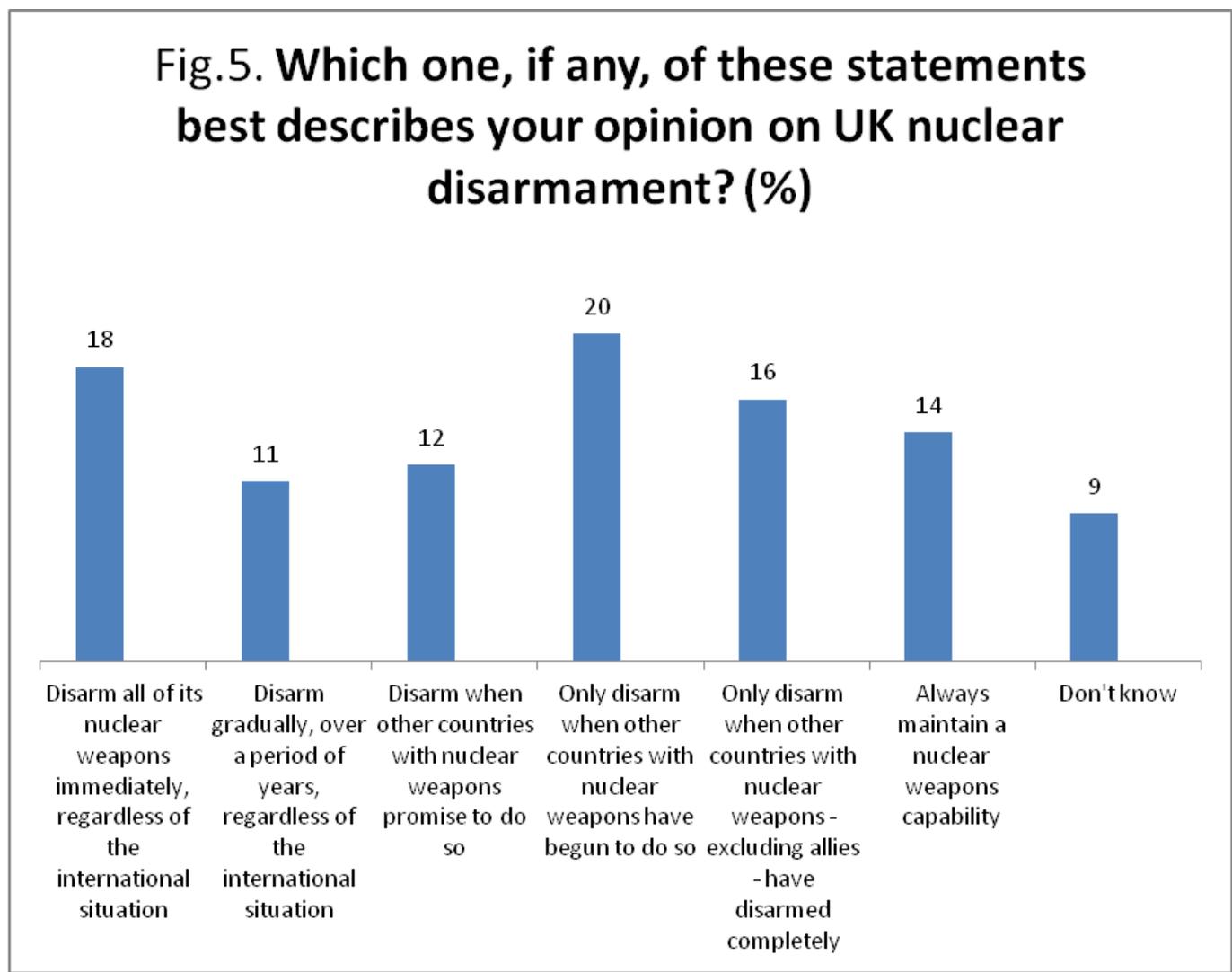


The UK public's general ambivalence towards nuclear weapon possession is shown with almost 1 in 2 people stating that they felt "neither more nor less safe because the UK possesses nuclear weapons", while those feeling safer or less safe, to varying degrees, were split evenly (see Fig. 4).

Fig.4. Which, if any, of these statements best describes your opinion on the UK's possession of nuclear weapons? (%)



With regards to the UK and nuclear weapon disarmament, 3 in 4 adults suggest that the UK should either disarm immediately or over a period of time (see Fig. 5), while only 15% believe that “The UK should always maintain a nuclear weapons capability”.

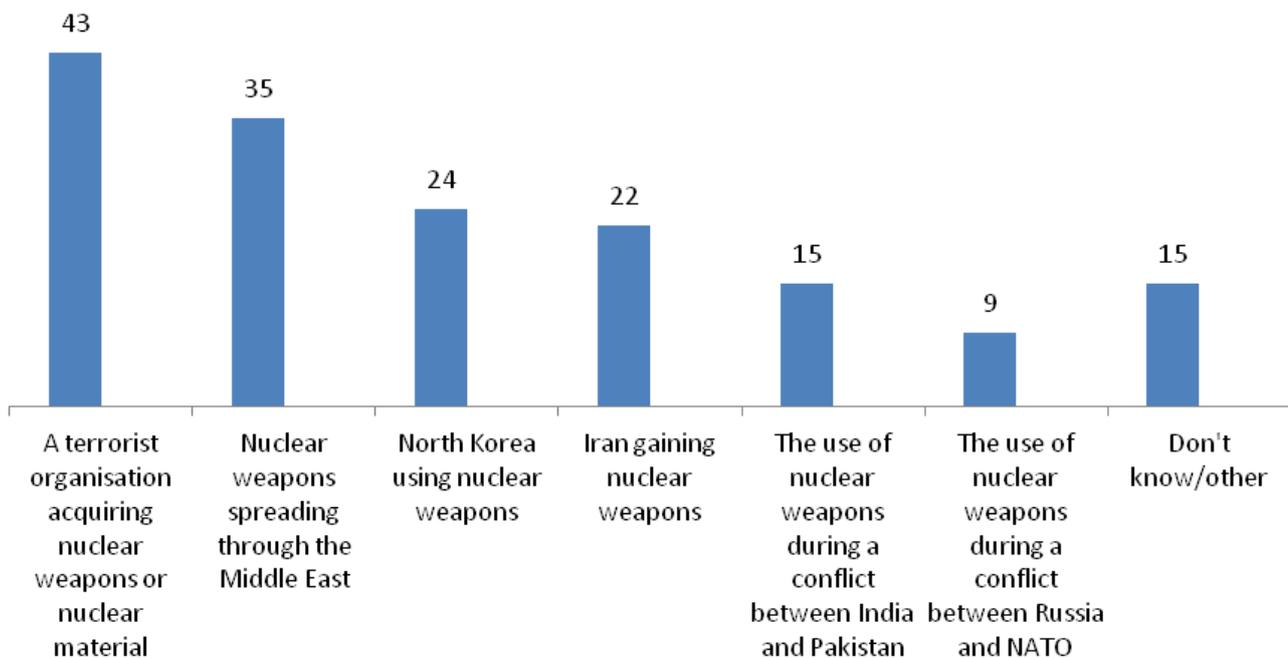


The Alternatives Review was announced in May 2011. Strikingly, since then the level of exclusively public debate in the UK regarding possible alternatives to Trident has been non-existent. The public has neither been consulted nor, judging from the findings in UNA-UK's survey, been convinced of the need to possess a nuclear weapons capability at all. This is perhaps reflective of the fact that the UK Government struggles to convey exactly whom Trident is defending the United Kingdom from.

With current and former Defence Secretaries referring to 'rogue states' and a 'resurgent Russia', it is interesting to note that only 9% of respondents in this survey view “the use of nuclear weapons during a conflict between Russia and NATO” as the chief nuclear-related threat facing us (see Fig. 6). Meanwhile 43% see the greatest threat emanating from “a terrorist organisation acquiring nuclear weapons or nuclear material”.

Fig.6. In your opinion, which of the following, if any, represents nuclear-related threats to international peace that are most likely to happen in the near future? (%)

**Multiple answers allowed*



In this regard, UK public opinion probably mirrors the opinions of many military and intelligence officials on Whitehall. Similarly, Trident possession, nor its replacement, will do little to slow nuclear proliferation in the Middle East – something feared by 35% of respondents. A vital point remains: if Trident is to be renewed, how does this sit with 21st Century security requirements? Indeed, how does this sit with the UK’s international commitment to multilateral disarmament?

The Government is committed to Trident, and the Alternatives Review will no doubt show this. This begs a question: at what point will any UK government, in an attempt to foster international trust and transparency, outline the international conditions that would be required to fulfil its obligation to disarm under Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)? Or are we to hold on to nuclear weapons forever? Ultimately – and this is why it becomes important to consider how closely the views of the state and public concur – at some point there must be greater ‘public-state’ concurrence on what sort of country the UK is set to become.

About UNA-UK

The United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK) is the UK's leading source of independent analysis on the UN and a grassroots movement campaigning for a safer, fairer and more sustainable world. UNA-UK seeks to increase knowledge of the UN and stimulate thought and debate on how to make it stronger, more credible and more effective.

Our Towards Zero programme builds on our historic role as a leading campaigner for nuclear non-proliferation and multilateral disarmament. The core strands of the programme are:

- influencing decisions-makers and opinion-shapers in the UK;
- working with key individuals and organisations in other nuclear-weapon states;
- collaborating with experts on policy options; and
- re-establishing nuclear disarmament as a central issue for the UK public.

For more information, visit www.una.org.uk/towards-zero or contact James Kearney, UNA-UK Peace and Security Programmes Manager, on kearney@una.org.uk or 020 7766 3446.

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