

Quakers in Britain submission to the Strategic Defence Review

Quakers in Britain are a faith group committed to peace, sustainability, equality and truth.

We are a member of [Rethinking Security](#), a network of organisations which challenge traditional narratives about what 'security' means, what the aims of security policy should be, and whose voices matter in setting it.

We advocate a human security approach: one that values the security of ordinary people equally to that of the state; sees the UK's security as interdependent with the security of other countries; and understands security as freedom from poverty and oppression as well as physical threats. A human security approach focuses on addressing the root causes of insecurity in the long-term rather than on projecting military strength.

Concerns with the Strategic Defence Review

We are concerned that the new government is carrying out a defence review without first conducting a wider integrated review to set the strategy for foreign and security policy, as previous governments have done. This implies that the government accepts the analysis of the last two wider security reviews – the Integrated Review (2021) and Integrated Review Refresh (2023). This seems to be a missed opportunity for the new government to set out its thinking – and consult widely – on what a peaceful and secure world looks like and the UK's role in achieving this. This approach also risks overlooking non-military contributions to a more secure UK and world, including diplomacy, development assistance and long-term peacebuilding.

We are disappointed that the [parameters of the SDR](#) make several foregone conclusions about defence policy, putting these issues beyond external scrutiny and debate. We particularly question the following commitments:

- A trajectory towards spending 2.5% of GDP on military spending.
- A 'total commitment' to the UK's nuclear weapons programme.
- The AUKUS security deal with the USA and Australia.

Finally, we are concerned that the framing of the call for evidence is not accessible to a more diverse range of perspectives, despite [the intentions of the reviewers](#) to 'engage widely and seek public views' and for it to be 'Britain's review'. The technical language in many of the questions/propositions is likely to be off-putting to those outside the defence/security sector.

We have responded to the Review propositions with a view to the wider foreign policy context and some of the policy issues outside the parameters, in the hope that the reviewers will scrutinise some of these issues.

1. Describe the strategic, threat, and operational context for UK Defence 2024- 2050.

We want to highlight two particularly significant threats to global human security 2024-2050. The first is increasing armed conflict, militarisation, geopolitical tensions and nuclear risk.

[According to the UN](#), 2023 saw the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War. Relatedly, the number of displaced people globally has [almost doubled](#) from around 60m in 2014 to 117m in 2023. Some of these wars are having a significant impact on geopolitical tensions, threatening to spread to other countries; particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's military attack on Gaza following the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023. These wars are also weakening confidence in the international rules-based order, as grave violations of international law have continued despite condemnations, leading to perceived double standards.

In this context, there is growing nuclear risk and decreasing confidence in the nuclear arms control regime. For example, in 2023 President Putin announced his decision to ‘suspend’ the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty even though it does not have a suspension mechanism. At the same time many nuclear armed states, including the UK, are carrying out extensive modernization and expansion of their nuclear weapons programmes.

States are also increasingly focusing on projecting conventional military strength. This is reflected in global military spending, which [rose for the ninth year in a row](#) in 2023, reaching an all-time high of \$2.44tn. This represented a 6.8% real terms increase; the highest seen since 2009.

The second significant threat is climate and ecological breakdown. We need much more rapid action to tackle the root causes of the problem. The IPCC [says](#) that its models suggest a continuation of current policies would lead to global warming of 3.2 degrees Celsius by 2100, while the 1.5 degree threshold would be breached in the early 2030s. As we are already seeing the impacts of climate breakdown, we also need to adapt to these in a just way.

However, we caution against a framing of climate breakdown as a ‘security threat’ to the UK requiring a defence-led response, for the following reasons:

- The UK is not experiencing the worst impacts of climate breakdown. Many of the poorest countries – who did the least to contribute to the problem – will suffer its worst impacts (otherwise known as ‘loss and damage’). From a human security perspective, the biggest threat is to the lives, livelihoods, health and human rights of these frontline communities. Framing the issue primarily as a threat to the UK’s national security risks obscuring that reality, and is also unlikely to be effective at building a secure world in the long-term.
- While climate change is understood to exacerbate conflict drivers, violence is by no means the inevitable result. [Peacebuilding approaches](#) can transform conflict if properly resourced.
- A defence-led response risks focusing on responding to the symptoms of climate breakdown, at the cost of tackling its root causes.

2. Propose, in order of priority, the roles UK Defence must be capable of fulfilling 2024-2040.

The UK can play an important role in de-escalating tensions, and taking steps to build confidence in arms control mechanisms and multilateral institutions.

The government should show leadership by affirming its commitment to Article VI of the NPT, which commits Parties to ‘pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament’. The government’s recent language of ‘total commitment’ to the UK’s nuclear weapons programme risks undermining this.

Other steps towards nuclear risk reduction would be for the UK to: publicly state a ‘no-first use’ policy; reverse its decision to stop publicly disclosing its quantity of nuclear weapons in order to encourage transparency by other states; and make public assurances that US nuclear weapons will not return to RAF Lakenheath.

The UK must uphold international law, notably by upholding and fully complying with the ICJ’s findings that Israel’s presence in the occupied Palestinian territory seriously breaches international law and must end. It must urgently end arms transfers and military support to Israel.

Defence must also reckon with the role it plays in driving climate and ecological breakdown, and with the transformation it must undergo as part of a just transition.

[A 2022 study](#) estimated the world's militaries (excluding warfighting) are responsible for 5.5% of global emissions; equivalent to that of the [aviation](#) and [shipping](#) industries combined. War and military activity also have a significant negative impact on biodiversity, chemical pollution and on communities' ability to safeguard their environment. In contrast, [peacebuilding supports effective climate action](#) (as well as [reducing the risk of renewed conflict](#)).

Climate breakdown therefore demands renewed political will for, and investment in, non-military responses to conflict; both because war and military activity are driving the problem, and because tackling the issue requires international cooperation.

We are concerned that current policy and funding priorities do not reflect this. The government's plan to increase military spending to 2.5% of GDP is likely to fuel a sense of insecurity among other states and drive further militarisation; a trend already in evidence from [rising global military expenditure](#), 55% of which comes from NATO members. [Research](#) also suggests a correlation between higher military spending and emissions. We are also concerned that the [MOD's 2021 climate security strategy](#) envisages a leading role for defence 'in response to the emerging geopolitical and conflict-related threats that are exacerbated by climate change', when [research emphasises](#) that civilian-led peacebuilding responses are likely to be more sustainable.

Military spending must not come at the cost of things which build the foundations of a safer world – and thereby reduce the demand on military resources. This includes the UK paying its fair share of climate finance to support countries impacted by climate breakdown, including Loss and Damage funding. It also includes greater investment in international development (which we hope to see restored to 0.7% of GDP), particularly conflict prevention and peacebuilding, which [fell by a half](#) as a proportion of the wider aid budget from 2010-2020.