

British nuclear forces<sup>1</sup>

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**Table.** British nuclear forces, January 2003

Type	Designation	No. deployed	Year first deployed	Range (km)	Warheads x yield	Warheads in stockpile
<i>SLBMs</i>						
D-5	Trident II	48	1994	> 7 400	1–3 x 100 kt	185

*Sources:* British Ministry of Defence (MOD), *Defence White Paper 1999*, Cm 4446 (Her Majesty's Stationery Office: London, 1999); British MOD press releases and the MOD Internet site, URL <<http://www.mod.uk/issues/sdr/index.htm>>, British MOD, *Strategic Defence Review* (MOD: London, July 1998); British MOD, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1996*, Cm 3223 (Her Majesty's Stationery Office: London, 1996); Ormond, D., 'Nuclear deterrence in a changing world: the view from a UK perspective', *RUSI Journal*, June 1996, pp. 15–22; Norris, R. S. *et al.*, *Nuclear Weapons Databook, Vol. V: British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons* (Westview: Boulder, Colo., 1994), p. 9; British House of Commons, *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*; 'NRDC Nuclear Notebook', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, various issues; and Author's estimate.

The UK maintains an arsenal of about 185 warheads for use by a fleet of four Trident SSBNs, consisting of 160 operational warheads and an additional 15 per cent of that number for spares. This makes the British arsenal the smallest of the five NPT-defined nuclear weapon states, even with an estimated programme cost of \$18.8 billion, and it may even be exceeded in size by Israel's nuclear arsenal.

At any given time the sole British Trident submarine on patrol will carry about 40 warheads on 16 US-produced Trident II (D-5) SLBMs. The second and third SSBNs can be put to sea fairly rapidly, with similar loadings, while the fourth might take longer because of its cycle of overhaul and maintenance. Although details of British SSBN patrols are tightly guarded secrets, there are reports that some coordination takes place between the UK and France.

The UK is the only nuclear weapon state that has publicly assigned its SSBNs 'sub-strategic missions'. According to a former British Ministry of Defence official, 'A sub-strategic strike would be the limited and highly

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Kristensen, H.M. and Kile, S., 'World nuclear forces', *SIPRI Yearbook 2003: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003). Hans M. Kristensen is a nuclear weapons policy analyst and a consultant to the Natural Resources Defense Council's nuclear programme. A former Senior Researcher with the Nautilus Institute in Berkeley, California, he is co-author of the NRDC Nuclear Notebook series in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

selective use of nuclear weapons in a manner that fell demonstrably short of a strategic strike, but with a sufficient level of violence to convince an aggressor who had already miscalculated our resolve and attacked us that he should halt his aggression and withdraw or face the prospect of a devastating strategic strike'.<sup>2</sup> Much like those of the USA and Russia, the UK's nuclear doctrine appears to encompass virtually any potential role. Speaking before Parliament's Defence Committee in March 2002, British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon asserted that 'states of concern' armed with weapons of mass destruction 'can be absolutely confident that in the right conditions we would be willing to use our nuclear weapons'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ormond, D., 'Nuclear deterrence in a changing world: the view from a UK perspective', *RUSI Journal*, June 1996, pp. 15–22.

<sup>3</sup> 'UK restates nuclear threat', BBC Online Network, 2 Feb. 2003, URL <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/2717939.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2717939.stm)>.