Nuclear Policy Storylistening Exercise
Practitioner Interview Summary Findings

This report is designed to provide context for those for participants at the project's expert synthesis workshop. It also forms part of the project's published material.

The seven interviews convey perspectives from individuals with backgrounds in defence and diplomacy in the UK and NATO. Some shared themes emerge and the report attempts to draw them out without going too far towards making synthetic judgements based on rich, but few, transcripts. Direct quotes from interviewees are presented in italics, and a full account of the methodology is in the Annex. The report is structured around the four interview questions:

1. What are the big decisions that (UK) nuclear policy-makers will face in the next 10 years?

2. What is it most important for decision-makers to know, that they don't already know?

3. What are major shortcomings of the evidence, models and anticipations of the future that decision-makers have available?

4. What stories or narratives are most influential to key collective identities in the field?

1. What are the big decisions that (UK) nuclear policy-makers will face in the next 10 years?

1.1 How to avoid the use of nuclear weapons in the near term, and how to respond to use if it happens: the war in Ukraine provides the most immediate and visible instance of policy-makers needing to be informed and to have robust anticipations of possible actions and consequences. *"The immediate decisions now are about posture, communication, and how to shape the other side's mind".*

The risk of Russia using nuclear weapons in Ukraine does not negate the need to consider other potential nuclear actors, and long-standing areas of risk including the Middle East and Taiwan. Each near term decision is also likely to shape the medium and long term context for future use: it is not only necessary to avoid use and escalation, but also to maintain conditions that minimise the risk of future use.

1.2 What multilateral and global arrangements will best suit the UK and how to achieve them: the future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is uncertain. It is not clear whether it is possible to maintain it, or what actions to take in order to try to do so. The UK-US-Australian alliance concerning nuclear-powered submarines is important, new in type, and relatively unknown in nature.

1.3 How to respond to the shifts in geopolitics, including the introduction of multiple power centres, with different approaches to using nuclear threats for influence, and

the possibilities of tactical ("limited") as well as strategic (potentially existential) nuclear warfare.

1.4 Determining the right level of UK investment in its nuclear deterrent and the nature of that deterrent: the UK's nuclear deterrent is both costly and significant. There are continuous decisions about what type of nuclear capability to maintain and how best to maintain it.

1.5 What to do to prepare for non-nuclear emergencies and how best to make arrangements for preventing, mitigating or responding to multiple intersecting crises: economic trends and shocks, climate-related crises including contributions to war, migration and civil unrest, and future pandemics, are relevant to nuclear decision-making: they may contribute to the level of nuclear risk, to the capacity for the UK to invest in its deterrent, and support for nuclear energy may affect future wider nuclear capability by encouraging people to seek careers in nuclear science and engineering. In some areas, decisions about investment in civil contingency capability are independent of immediate cause, so may be relevant to nuclear policy even if also relevant to other areas such as extreme weather events, cyberwarfare, pandemics or non-nuclear terrorism.

2. What is it most important for decision-makers to know, that they don't already know?

One interviewee pointed out that it was a particular challenge in areas of nuclear warfare decision-making that it was typical not to know what others in your own government, with whom you were working, knew or didn't know, as they might not be able to tell you. (A very practical skill was learning how to give senior people information in the right way, while knowing that they might already have it but not be able to disclose that). This clearly applies to the interviewees too: there will be knowledge or evidence, and there will be acknowledged areas of ignorance or uncertainty, that are very pertinent to future decisions but which do not form part of reasoning in the public sphere even though they may form part of reasoning on the public's behalf.

2.1 Near term decision-making

In the context of decision-making during war, or in order to build international agreements, answers focussed strongly on the need to be able better to anticipate the future actions of key individuals and nations, especially with respect to Russia and, to a lesser extent, China. Teasing this need out, one set of issues concerned how to understand a powerful individual's worldview: their framing, mental models and their motivations and assumptions. For example, the extent to which President Putin's worldview is determined by a belief in the role of the nation state and the freedom of operation of other nations' leaders. Decision-makers want to know: *"what is Putin thinking, and what will he do?*" They also want to know what other major players, particularly the US and China, will do.

> *"There have been recent comments made by Putin saying that Russia will use "all means available". Putin denies explicitly threatening the use of nuclear weapons, but his words can reasonably be interpreted that way. What would be the red line that is crossed for Putin to take such action? Is it if Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine*

collapse? Is it if Ukrainians cross the border into Crimea? There are two further parts to this issue. If nuclear usage is a realistic possibility, what decisions can we take in order to forestall it? If nuclear weapons were used, then what would the response be? On one hand, such a step couldn't be left unanswered. On the other, we wouldn't want things to escalate."

Another set of issues concerned the extent to which the notion of a single decision-maker is correct: what elite groups influence them; to what extent are their views and actions informed by public opinion and what, in turn, informs that opinion. One interviewee pointed out that the influence of public opinion varies by country. In terms of Ukraine, they said that governments in France, Germany, Poland and the Baltic countries are more sensitive to public opinion than UK or US governments. Another interviewee noted that the war in Ukraine has not strongly penetrated UK public discourse on nuclear policy.

2.2 Medium term decision-making

Interviewees outlined the need for more evidence about the potential future behaviours of multiple nations and players.

"Some big specific decisions will be connected to geo-political and geo-economical shifts: such as China's increasing power and assertiveness internationally, and the intensification of competition between states and with non-state actors, manifested in: a growing contest over international rules and norms; the formation of competing geopolitical and economic blocs of influence and values that cut across our security; the deliberate targeting of the vulnerabilities within democratic systems by authoritarian states and malign actors; and the testing of the boundary between war and peace, as states use a growing range of instruments to undermine and coerce others."

There was a comment that the ownership of nuclear weapons might be the 21st century equivalent of having an empire: a mark of being a major global player (with the implication that, by the 22nd century, it might be seen as unethical).

"One of the questions that's really at stake right now is: what makes a great power? ……There is this massive question over whether Russia is itself a great power. It thinks it is, many states don't think it is, and the trial is being held in Southern Ukraine and in the Donbas. But then nuclear becomes part of that…..The reason the Russian tanks advancing on Kiev are not smoking wrecks is nothing to do with the Security Council. It's because Russia has nuclear weapons."

2.3 Investment in the UK's nuclear deterrent

With respect to the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent submarines, decision-makers need to know more about the nature and effectiveness of potential future alliances, the UK's economic strength, and public opinion. One interviewee noted that the investment appeared less publicly contentious at present than it had done at times in the later 20th century.

3. What are major shortcomings of the evidence, models and anticipations of the future that decision-makers have available?

3.1 Possible narrative lock-in or deficits

Several interviewees refer to the difficulty of responding sufficiently rapidly and effectively to the changing geopolitical and technological environment. For example, persistent worldviews or framing might create challenges that hinder decision-makers or practitioners from paying attention to all the potentially relevant evidence, or from exploring the full plausible range of anticipations.

> *"If your core insight about the world right now is that certainties we thought we had – that there is a particular way of organising the world, established after 1945, and it's just a question of how quickly and how fast it spread – are no longer true, then I think it's inevitable that, in portraying this, you don't leap straight for a moral core; there'll be a reaction and then a counter-reaction"*

A particular risk for adapting decision-making to changing global contexts is that the UK's nuclear orientation and much public debate remains focused on the presumption of existential threats from the use of nuclear weapons, whereas other nations are using nuclear weapons to coerce or influence, admitting the possibility of tactical (limited) use. The UK's situation is complicated by the country's unique features: its specific current (largely strategic) nuclear capabilities and its relatively small size and dense population, which mean that tactical use against it would in effect be strategic.

> *"UK thinking about nuclear weapons in the last 30-40 years has been that they would only be used in the most extreme circumstances, where the very existence of Britain was under threat, as it was in 1940 but hasn't been since. If you start from that premise, then you design your nuclear weapons systems with only being able to deal with that scenario. However, other countries have been more prepared to think about scenarios which are short of a complete threat to the existence of the country; for instance, where a country is in conflict or competition with another country and wants to use nuclear weapons as a way of achieving some more limited goals than survival. That leads you to wanting a different range of nuclear weapons: smaller and more flexible ones that can be used without engaging the other side in an existential exchange"*

> *"Some states are now significantly increasing and diversifying their nuclear arsenals. They are investing in novel nuclear technologies and developing new "warfighting" nuclear systems which they are integrating into their military strategies and doctrines and into their political rhetoric to seek to coerce others. The increase in global competition, challenges to the international order, and proliferation of potentially disruptive technologies (including non-nuclear ones) all pose a threat to strategic stability"*

Some interviewees referred to the difficulty of envisioning a future in which national failure (at least partial) and instability were the default, whereas for many decades the Western

assumption, shaped by the end of World War II and the fall of the Iron Curtain, has been that it is possible to return to some form of global stability.

> "*There are multiple systems of institutions, laws, rules and norms that comprise the international order. Each country must tailor its approach to the opportunities and challenges it faces in each of them. The evolution of the rules and norms of existing rule-based structures may mean they become more normative and behavioural, and less often based on hard rules or laws; they might develop more complex geographic architectures (eg local, regional, global) and be cognisant of non-state based as well as state-based agents."*

3.2 How decisions are made

For decisions concerning war and international alliances, some interviewees' answers to this question were dominated by consideration of the use of evidence, rather than of shortcomings in its absolute nature or quantity: *"In twenty years, no one has ever said to me the phrase "where's the evidence for that?""* They outlined problems with institutional memory and the difficulty of learning from history or past experience, whether in the last few years or over a century. Barriers included a lack of a capacity both for remembering, and then for discriminating about and usefully applying, historical knowledge.

> *"… there is often a striking failure of corporate memory about 18 months after a crisis: as if nations, individually and collectively, cannot bear the trauma of what they've been through and so they forget about it…..Therefore, one important thing to know is that we need to fight against the reflex not to engage with these past events."*

The vocabulary for describing forms of organisational knowledge or memory in the MoD includes *"folk memories", "vignettes"* and *"episodes".* Alongside the challenges of collective memory formation, is the difficulty of testing or even noticing assumptions held by senior decision-makers, or by influential groups. In many parts there is a cultural dependence on rhetoric, and ability to "use" case studies, narratives or illustrations selectively and persuasively to achieve a predetermined desired outcome. To counter this tendency, which is especially marked at times of urgency, one interviewee suggested that the Joint Intelligence Committee is the closest equivalent in the area of defence to the primary rapid evidence-synthesising mechanism for civil emergencies which is SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies).

One interviewee commented on the pervasiveness of mantras and truisms: assumptions that can become policy without being questioned. It can be problematic when mantras become so ingrained that to suggest other policy options may destroy one's influence. In terms of nuclear, this raises questions as to what policy options are 'taboo' to suggest.

> *"[There is an] idea that if Russia uses a nuclear weapon, we have to respond robustly, or we destroy the nuclear taboo. But this could bring about World War III. There are other responses…….The way policy works, you get assumptions, and they become policy…..[Other] policy options become not just morally problematic but may destroy your influence – whereas this might actually be the moment for serious talks about compromise."*

Another interviewee similarly commented on the risk of groupthink, remarking that Chairs should encourage uncomfortable questions and views. This interviewee noted that groupthink was evident during the Cuban Missile Crisis, where top-level discussions indicated a tendency to avoid uncomfortable questions.

3.3 Structural problems with providing evidence

There are structural problems with getting evidence to support future decisions including:

a) Deterrence requires proof of a negative, why and how something didn't happen. Upstream deterrence prevents even the discussion of an idea, so there is no evidence it worked.

b) There is no quantitative evidence that is relevant, nor is there any qualitative evidence on nuclear weapon use in anger, beyond Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

c) There is a generational problem, because nuclear has not been relevant for 30-40 years. Senior people have largely retired, and experience in nuclear policy has not been a fast track to promotion. There is also a historiography problem, where assumptions about how the Cold War was won, for example, are held because people want them to be true. There is a broader point that, within a general low level of background knowledge or familiarity with the debates, there is a danger of key figures such as politicians becoming captured by an idea or an untested assumption that may be uncertain or even factually incorrect. This is also true of some probabilistic work by people such as some superforecasters. (An example of a false idea that sometimes gains currency is the notion that a missile from Russia to the UK could be intercepted effectively). A false idea may also come from a movie.

3.4 Considering multiple types of risk

In discussing the intersection between different risks and crises, one interviewee argued that there was a worrying lack of capacity or interest in synthesising evidence and decision-making across different areas, which had potentially significant implications for nuclear decision-making. For example, whereas there is a well-developed mechanism for considering climate evidence and policies, there is no accepted national or international forum for considering climate alongside other issues such as warfare, economics or pandemics, either in terms of evidence or international governance.

Another interviewee described the need to focus on the nature of the problems created, rather than of the risk that creates them.

> *"There are potentially thousands of risks….this can divert too much time and energy down rabbit holes, with an overwhelming multitude of scenarios to explore…..On the one hand, don't overcomplicate things; on the other, be prepared for everything happening at the same time…Have we always one team focused on the long term, one on the medium, and one on the short term? This is what our military colleagues do."*

Across all the decision-areas interviewees referred to the challenges of conceptualising multiple potential futures. Games and interactive simulations were one way of creating "evidence" and of increasing decision-makers' and practitioners' engagement with available models and evidence. Developments in digital technologies mean games and synthetic environments are increasingly sophisticated. This might be, for example, to examine potential nuclear warfare escalation patterns or future geo-political governance arrangements. "Exercising", which has some similarities with gaming, is an important part both of military and of civil contingency planning at a national or local level, with an important role in building capability and training people and systems on how to deal with emergencies. Implicitly, this capability building was assumed to be both cognitive, such as helping to identify gaps in preparedness, and affective, such as helping individuals understand themselves and their own likely emotions and behaviours at times of crisis.

4. What stories or narratives are most influential to key collective identities in the field?

4.1 Stories within nuclear practitioner and policy communities

Three interviewees identified those directly employed in nuclear military operations as forming a strongly defined collective identity, most extreme in the case of nuclear submariners. The military acquisition community (based in Bristol) has also been distinct. More generally, policy-makers (senior officials, and politicians) in defence and diplomacy were more likely to move in and out of contact with nuclear issues, and did not form such a strong collective identity with respect to nuclear.

One interviewee also referred to the way that narratives about key individuals associated with the nuclear policy and practitioner communities were circulated both during and after their lifetimes. For example, from the 1970s, Sir Michael Quinlan was a respected figure seen as extremely expert and openly engaging deeply with ethical issues in terms of his religious (Catholic) convictions

The Cuban Missile Crisis seemed to be a pre-eminent source of narrative with respect to nuclear policy, still studied, rehearsed and used to illustrate aspects of decision-making such as the dangers of groupthink, and the potential significance of individual actions at a time of extreme crisis.

With respect to popular stories:

> *"There's quite a big industry of people who design submarines, warheads, etc., and they are scientists, and then there's quite a small community which thinks about nuclear deterrence. If you get two or three of these people together, it won't be long before one of them starts talking about one of the films that has covered these subjects over the last 40/50 years – for example, Dr Strangelove or War Games. There's one called By Dawn's Early Light, which is a favourite for people interested in this area, and there's a lot of Tom Clancy novels which cover it. This community of people has absorbed all that stuff and they love it. Partly, it's the fascination with how fiction and film treat your areas."*

4.2 Stories associated with nations and leaders

More generally, interviewees mentioned a small number of compelling speeches or reports which they believed were influential to them and to others. These included an Atlantic Council report (Oct 2022), the Strategic Defence and Security Review (2015), and speeches by Tony Blair in Chicago (1998) and President Obama in Cairo (2009).

In terms of the key characteristics of these speeches and reports one interviewee, broadening their comments to other policy areas, said:

> *"What is it in narratives that moves policy? Simplicity, conviction, an appeal to human instinct that feels like the right thing for us to be doing. However, it's hard to find something arresting in the economic space….. Gordon Brown is now thought to have done pretty well in internationalising the global economic crisis……But unlike Blair and Obama, he wasn't articulate. He had the idea, but he didn't really have the delivery. So the content can be arresting, it can have conviction, it can be idealistic, but if the messenger isn't credible or won't be listened to…"*

Commenting on the implied use of stories by national leaders another interviewee pointed to the specific way in which Presidents Putin and Biden appear to be looking at historical narratives about former leaders:

> *"I recently met somebody who had met an oligarch who had met Lavrov, the foreign minister, recently. He asked Lavrov: who is the boss listening to? Lavrov responded: Catherine the Great, Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible. These are the three advisors he's listening to at the moment. In other words, Lavrov's reading of Putin was that he is engaged in a conversation with history which is shaping how he views the world. I think this is what leaders do. You can see it with Biden at the moment; I think he's looking back to Kennedy in the 60s and looking for the kind of balance between firmness and openness to compromise that Kennedy struck in the Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy did take risks and he did some bold things like imposing a blockade around Cuba, but he also restrained the military's instincts and maintained a dialogue. I think that's the story that Biden is trying to recreate for himself."*

4.3 Stories about decision-making and the nature of warfare

Several interviewees discussed the way in which popular stories from the second half of the 20th century continued to inform or be used to illustrate current thinking alongside more recent stories. Their comments discuss points of view and models of parts of the evidence and practitioner systems.

> *"Something I find a little bit frustrating sometimes is that fiction and films dealing with war and conflict almost always tackle it from the point of view of participants in the conflict; often it's somebody at the bottom and the experience they are going through. For instance, Saving Private Ryan or All Quiet on the Western Front. The question of high command – of how policy-makers and senior military figures take big decisions – doesn't get treated very often. If it is, it is often treated in a limited or negative way; senior generals are presented as war mongers, as dismissive of the people. But once you get to know senior military figures, you realise that most of them are much more*

sophisticated and interesting than that. By and large, fiction does not give a very good account of senior decision-making.

From this corpus of particular films about nuclear deterrence, you mostly get the risk of escalation, of the situation getting out of control. …….It doesn't feel a very plausible scenario for how senior decision makers would actually approach something like this.

…….: The military and civil service have grown up professionally in organisations that value collective process and systematic decision-making. You don't get to the top of the civil service or military as a rogue general/character. You might have people that are more assertive than others, but there is much more of an emphasis on decision-making and consideration in the real world than is represented in literature or film……

There's also something about the morality of senior leadership which has changed. If you watch war films from the 1940s,50s and 60s, you still see portrayals of senior leaders who may not always get things right; they may make mistakes, but they are portrayed as essentially decent people working under great pressure. The classic example is Jack Hawkins in The Cruel Sea. It's a classic Cold War film …….Now there's an industry of portrayals of the top of the British military security establishment as people essentially looking to delude and deceive the public. It isn't just that they don't acknowledge the system, but there's an underlying assumption that senior authority must be corrupt and corrupting. You can see this in things like Spooks, The Iron Sky – the idea that the top of the civilian establishment is out to get you."

4.4 Popular stories and UK public debate

Raymond Briggs' *When the Wind Blows*, was cited as an illustration of an influential story, popular with publics during the Cold War, which was

"a way of preparing the whole family in quite a reasonable and understandable way for national disaster…[and]...placed a profound responsibility on leaders to prepare for the worst, while doing all they could to make sure it didn't happen."

By contrast, some popular fiction such as James Bond films, focussed too heavily on the notion of the arch-villain, when - despite the current focus on President Putin - it is problematic to assume that the enemy is always organised in this way.

The prevalence of stories that appear to anticipate strategic rather than tactical nuclear warfare continues in interviewees' discussion of publics engagement with nuclear policy.

"The UK is unique amongst nuclear armed states in having one major decision area: submarines, one weapon and one warhead type. So major policy decisions have been "yes/no". And the UK is the only major armed state where the peace and unilateral disarmament movement has had a serious effect. This has polarised the debate in ways that are unhelpful to having a good policy – the yes/no question is

important, but focusing only on that gets in the way of talking about other significant issues. Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party brought this polarisation back to the fore recently, reviving memories of the 1983 Labour Party Manifesto onwards, causing Labour moderates to worry about appearing 'tough' on nuclear issues, and discouraging Conservatives who might otherwise have asked difficult questions about the details of nuclear policy and programming from doing so, for fear of undermining an attack line.

The history means that there are groups of people who still want no nuclear weapons in the UK, some who see themselves as Trident advocates, and some who are directly representing the interests of those employed by the relevant industries (eg MPs with constituencies dependent on employment in the sector). There is a small specialist community interested in nuclear policy, inside and outside government. There are those involved in manufacturing and operating it (eg in AWE or on the Clyde). Then there are large parts of the population who simply haven't thought about it. Amongst other challenges, these groups may be vulnerable to being influenced by out-of-date stories."

ANNEX A: Methodology

The steering group identified and approached policy practitioners with experience in nuclear policy, foreign policy, and defence more broadly.

Two interviews were conducted in person, and five online. The interview script is included here, and the ethics and consent forms are available on request. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and these (confidential) transcripts were used as a basis for the interview synthesis.

Details of interviewees

Name: Matthew Harries
Recent roles held: Director of Proliferation and Nuclear Policy at Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)
Date of interview: 06.01.23

Name: Will Jessett
Recent roles held: Director at SC Strategy (current); Director for Strategic Planning at Ministry of Defence (2014-2019)
Date of interview: 22.11.22

Name: Angus Lapsley
Recent roles held: NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defence Policy and Planning (current); Director for Defence, International Security and South East Europe at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), (2017-2019)
Date of interview: 03.01.23

Name: Matthew Preston
Recent roles held: Head of Multilateral Research Group at Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Date of interview: 17.11.22

Name: Susan Scholefield
Recent roles held: Director General Safety Governance and Regulation, Ministry of Defence; Director General Human Resources and Corporate Services, Ministry of Defence
Date of interview: 14.11.22

Name: Peter Watkins.
Recent roles held: Director General Strategy and International, Ministry of Defence (2017-2018); Director General Security Policy, Ministry of Defence (2014-2017)
Date of interview: 09.11.22

Anonymous context briefing provided by a current practitioner, with the content included within the report alongside the interviews.

Annex B: Interview Script

Thanks for agreeing to take part.

Quick recap on project: purpose, timeline.

Role of the practitioner interviews: primarily to inform the selection and direction of the academic stimulus papers, and of the synthesis workshop.

Groundrules (covered by ethics form):

- Record interview or not?
- Like to clear the written note of the interview?
- Wish to see the summary report before it is circulated?
- Wish to be attributed in the summary report and project documents (can decide when seen the final draft)?
- How would you like to be kept in touch? Attend workshop, receive papers, receive final report?

Body of the interview

1. What are three big decisions that [your organisation/policy-makers] will face in the next 10 years?

2. What would [you most like/would be most important for them] to know to make these decisions that [you/they] don't already know?

3. What are major shortcomings of the evidence, models and anticipations of the future that [you/they] have available?

4. What stories or narratives are most influential to key collective identities in [your/the] field [and to you personally/] (noting that these may be in texts in any medium; published by public, private or civil organisations; and badged as non-fiction or fiction)?

Wrap up

- Are there any other issues you think we should be aware of?
- Is there anyone else you now think might be interested or relevant?
- Is there any source material we should ensure we have seen?
- Please feel free to follow up if other points occur to you, in writing or through a further word.

Thank you.