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Why is the UK government so infatuated with nuclear power ?

As the nuclear option looks less and less sensible, it becomes harder to explain Whitehall's enthusiasm. **Might it be to do with the military ?**

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Against a worldwide background of [declining fortunes for nuclear power](#), UK policy enthusiasm continues to intensify. Already pursuing [one of the most ambitious nuclear new-build agendas in the world](#), Britain is seeking to buck 50 years of experience to develop an entirely new and untested design of [small modular reactors \(SMRs\)](#). In 2016, then energy and climate secretary, Amber Rudd, summed up the government's position : ["Investing in nuclear is what this government is all about for the next 20 years."](#)

Despite unique levels of [long-term policy support](#), this nuclear new-build programme is [severely delayed](#), with no chance of operations beginning as intended ["significantly before 2025"](#). Costs have [mushroomed](#), with even [government figures](#) showing renewables like [offshore wind to already be far more affordable](#). With [renewable costs still plummeting](#), global investments in these alternatives are now already [greater than for all conventional generating technologies put together](#). With worldwide momentum so clear, the scale of UK nuclear ambitions are an international anomaly.

Unswerving British nuclear support contrasts sharply with obstructive national policy on other technologies. In 2015 [various strategies supporting renewables and energy efficiency were abandoned](#), with the [cheapest UK low-carbon power](#) (onshore wind), [effectively halted](#). The consequences of these cuts are now clear. The output of community energy projects has [fallen by 99.4%](#). National investment in renewables has [halved](#). Meanwhile, [UK industrial strategy continues to prioritise nuclear](#). [Nuclear R&D gets 12 times as much funding as renewables](#) in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's "Energy Innovation Programme". Instead of considering alternatives to spiralling nuclear costs, the UK government is looking to accommodate them with

[entirely new models of public financing](#). It seems clear that – for some undeclared reason and regardless of comparative costs or global trends – Britain simply *must* have new nuclear power.

The [depth of this Whitehall bias](#) creates a challenging environment for reasoned debate over British energy policy. To many, it seems scarcely believable that UK plans are so massively out of sync with current trends. The sheer weight of UK nuclear incumbency has successfully marginalised the entirely reasonable understanding that – like many technologies before it – nuclear power is simply going obsolete.

With [direct reasons for the UK's eccentric national position still unstated](#), we should pay attention to body language. Here, clues may be found in the work of the [National Audit Office \(NAO\)](#). Its [2017 report of 2017](#) points out serious flaws in the economic case for new nuclear – highlighting “unquantified”, “strategic” reasons why the UK still prioritises new nuclear despite the setbacks and increasingly attractive alternatives. Yet the NAO remains uncharacteristically unclear as to what these reasons might be.

[An earlier NAO report may shed more light](#). Their 2008 costing of military nuclear activities states : “One assumption of the future deterrent programme is that the United Kingdom submarine industry will be sustainable and that the costs of supporting it will not fall directly on the future deterrent programme.” If the costs of keeping the national nuclear submarine industry in business must fall elsewhere, what could that other budget be ?

Although unstated, [by far the most likely source for such support is a continuing national civil nuclear programme](#). And this where the [burgeoning hype around UK development of SMRs](#) comes in. Leading designs for these [reactors are derived directly from submarine propulsion](#). British nuclear submarine reactor manufacturer Rolls-Royce [is their most enthusiastic champion](#). But, amid [intense media choreography](#), links between SMRs and submarines remain (aside from [reports of our own work](#)) barely discussed in the UK press.

This neglect is odd, because the issues are very clear. Regretting that military programmes are no longer underwritten by civil nuclear research, [a heavily redacted 2014 MoD report expresses serious concerns over the continued viability of the UK nuclear submarine industry](#). And Rolls-Royce itself is clear that success in securing government investment for SMRs would [“relieve the Ministry of Defence of the burden of developing and retaining skills and capability”](#) for the UK’s military nuclear sector. Other defence sources are also unambiguous that [survival of the British nuclear submarine industry depends on continuation of UK civil nuclear power](#). Many new government initiatives focus intently on [realising the military and civil synergies](#).

Some nuclear enthusiasts have called this analysis a [conspiracy theory](#), but these links are now becoming visible. In response to [our own recent evidence](#) to the UK Public Accounts Committee, [a senior civil servant briefly acknowledged the connections](#). And with [US civil nuclear programmes collapsing](#), the submarine links are also [strongly emphasised by a former US energy secretary](#). Nuclear submarines are evidently crucial to Britain’s [cherished identity as a “global power”](#). It seems that Whitehall’s [infatuation with civil nuclear energy](#) is in fact a military romance.

So why does the UK debate on these issues remain so muted ? It is now beyond serious dispute that nuclear power has been overtaken by the extraordinary pace of progress in renewables. But – for those so minded – the military case for nuclear power remains. In a democracy, it might be expected that these arguments at least be tested in public. So, the real irrationality is that an entire policy arena should so comprehensively fail to debate such crucial issues. In the end, all technologies become obsolete. If we are not honest about UK civil nuclear policy, the danger is that British democracy may go the same way.