

Global Britain: Navigating between Europe and the Indo-Pacific?

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The United Kingdom lost an empire, found, and then left the European Union, and is now running an obstacle course towards a new role.¹ An important part of navigating that course is the government's publication of several strategy documents in 2020 and 2021.² The three documents provide analysis and thinking that are intended to guide the UK's foreign, security, defence and development policy toward 2030. This memo assesses three aspects of the documents: the UK's threat perception, its geographic priorities, and its focus on science and technology.

The UK usually publishes new strategy documents every five years, but there are three reasons why the recent documents are especially significant. First, they are timely. The UK has decisively left the EU, while the last strategy documents were published before Brexit, in 2015, and were of little guidance.³ From 2021, the country's closest ally, the United States, has a new administration that intends to work more closely with partners than its predecessor. Second, great power competition is accelerating, primarily between the US, China and Russia. Third, the world is changing quickly, not least in the technological domain.

When the UK releases new strategy documents, it usually surrounds them with hype. This was also the case in 2020 and 2021, when the government published three such documents: *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*; *Defence in a Competitive Age*; and *The Integrated Operating Concept*. The documents are intended to provide content and meaning to the government's slogan of 'Global Britain'. They should be viewed as a hierarchy, with the *Integrated Review* on top, in a position similar to a national security strategy, then *Defence in A Competitive Age*, similar to a national defence strategy, and below that, the *Integrated Operating Concept*, a more specialised defence document.

On the surface, the latest documents convey coherence and realism, and appear written with near academic rigour. This is likely a reflection of the fact that John Bew, a scholar from King's College London's Centre for Grand Strategy, and now foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, had a prominent role in writing them.⁴ The UK government has also allocated a four-year budget settlement (rather than the standard one-year settlement), which adds credibility, to the execution of the defence part of the *Integrated Review* and accompanying documents.⁵

The purpose of this memo is to study how the UK government sees Britain's role in global affairs in the coming decade and identify and assess some key challenges to its ability to achieve its goals. First, the UK's domestic political situation, which will significantly affect the government's ability to follow through on its intended global policy, is briefly considered. This is followed by a focus on three aspects of the strategy documents. The first aspect is the government's main threat perception, namely great power competition. The second involves assessing the UK's stated priority of the Euro-Atlantic, particularly in light of the simultaneously announced tilt to the Indo-Pacific. The third is an outline of the government's investments in science and technology, given that they make up a significant portion of the strategy documents.

1 Dean Acheson famously said in 1962: "Great Britain has lost an empire but not yet found a role".

2 HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, 2021; Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, 2021; Ministry of Defence, *The Integrated Operating Concept*, 2020.

3 HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, London: The Stationary Office, 2015.

4 Grylls, George. 'John Bew profile: Pragmatist who led the defence review'. *The Times*. March 17, 2021.

5 *The Integrated Review*, p. 101.

The principal source is the *Integrated Review*, which is the most important document, but the other documents are also drawn on here when relevant.

This memo focuses on the selected aspects of security policy, but is not exhaustive, given that strategy documents state many things. Examples from the country's defence policy are used to illustrate the use of the armed forces to achieve the UK's security policy goals. However, factors such as force structure or defence acquisition are not assessed in depth. Last, the UK's policies regarding, for example, climate change, organised crime or health, despite being part of the strategy documents, are not studied, as this memo focuses on the traditional aspects of hard security.

A DOMESTIC OBSTACLE COURSE

While the 2019 election provided Prime Minister Johnson with a strong parliamentary mandate, as of autumn 2021 the government is still navigating multiple difficult issues. After several years of complex Brexit negotiations, in 2019 British voters elected a government whose first priority was to leave the EU.⁶ Then Covid-19 appeared and made everything harder. Currently, the government needs to handle high global energy prices, labour shortages in some sectors, and high inflation.⁷ These issues risk undermining the government's signature policy of "levelling up", which is mostly about channelling resources towards the less-privileged parts of the UK, e.g., the north of England.⁸ The opposition parties – Labour and the Liberal Democrats – are not ready to assume power, as both are experiencing internal struggles, but their poll numbers have recently increased. However, the next election is scheduled for May 2024, so the Conservative party will likely have a few years to advance its agenda, despite fluctuating poll numbers.⁹

The UK's wider economic and trade prospects are uncertain. During the Brexit campaign, its supporters argued

that it would be easy to secure beneficial trade deals with, for example, the US. These benign deals have not yet fully materialised.¹⁰ In the coming years, it is not clear whether the government will be able to reach sufficiently beneficial trade deals with the US or that the EU deal will function well. Will trade with other countries compensate? If the domestic economic situation does not steadily improve, or GDP shrinks, even, it is not clear what the government would prioritise. Early signs indicate that if the government must choose between fully funding its domestic agenda, for example, the National Health Service (the government health system); or funding the Global Britain agenda, it would choose the former.¹¹

Two large issues pertaining to Brexit linger: Northern Ireland's border, and Scotland's future. The UK and EU are negotiating how to manage the border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, but may not resolve this soon.¹² The unionists in Northern Ireland do not want separate treatment from the rest of the UK, and many people in Northern Ireland prefer to join Ireland.¹³ Protests could escalate. During the so-called 'troubles' of the 1970s, the British Army deployed a division to the area, and it would be difficult for the resource-strapped British government to have to attempt to solve any similar situation today.¹⁴ In Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) is advocating another independence referendum; the last was held in 2014. The British government is staunchly against it, but if realised, another referendum would risk breaking up the Union. Furthermore, the SNP is heavily against maintaining the UK's nuclear deterrent at the Clyde naval base. If Scotland becomes independent, moving the naval base would be one expensive consequence.¹⁵

Combined, these issues form a formidable obstacle course. In its midst, the government has tried to define a new role for the UK in global affairs. This is no easy task. Despite the end of empire, the country and its citizens

6 Henley, Jon. 'Boris Johnson wins huge majority on to 'Get Brexit done'', *The Guardian*, 13 Dec 2019.

7 'Covid or Brexit? What's to blame for Britain's shortages?', *The Times*, Oct 9 2021.

8 'The Tories are deadly serious about levelling up', *The Economist*, Oct 9 2021.

9 'National parliament voting intention', *Politico Europe*, 26 Nov 2021.

10 'Joe Biden plays down chances of UK-US trade deal', *BBC*, 22 Sept 2021.

11 'Boris Johnson outlines new 1.25% health and social care tax to pay for reforms', *BBC*, 7 Sept 2021.

12 Burchard, Hans Von Der, 'EU countries urge hard line toward UK over Northern Ireland', *Politico*, 11 Nov 2021.

13 Savage, Michael & O'Carroll, Lisa. 'Majority of Northern Irish voters want vote on staying in UK', *The Guardian*, 29 Aug 2021.

14 'Number of soldiers in Northern Ireland lowest since 1969', *BBC*, 24 Oct 2014; Size of the UK Army is around 72,500. A division is between 6000-20 000 soldiers.

15 Payne, Sebastian & Warell, Helen. 'MoD could move UK nuclear subs abroad if Scotland breaks away', *The Financial Times*, 1 Sept 2021.

have long held an outsized view of the UK's interests and achievable goals.¹⁶ These outsized ambitions and goals have often not matched the allocated resources.¹⁷ The released documents of 2020 and 2021 are meant to equal the government's map going forward.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION, BUT NOT WARFIGHTING?

In all the released strategy documents, the UK government argues that the world has entered a period of "systemic competition", particularly among great power states.¹⁸ The state actors and the various actions they take are described as "persistent" and more "assertive".¹⁹ Officials and parliamentarians also frequently express this at hearings, meetings and conferences. Moreover, the British documents describe an international security environment in which the state threats will persist, and likely grow, over the next decade.

The UK considers China the most important actor in great power competition. Officially, the government is trying to avoid explicitly portraying China as a threat, but also conveys the importance of protecting the UK's critical infrastructure against, for example, Chinese cyberattacks or espionage.²⁰ The reason, in a manner similar to that of many Western states, is that they do not want to dissuade Chinese direct inward investment, nor risk British companies' access to the Chinese market. However, parliamentarians and Britain's actions clearly identify China as a significant threat.²¹ The recently agreed AUKUS deal, between Australia, the UK, and the US, offers one example of such actions. It is clear that the UK considers China as not merely a competitor, but a threat.

The question is how sustainable the government's balancing approach will be in coming years. The UK faces a difficult situation. It wants to be a free, trading nation, but having left the EU and the common market, it has

limited bargaining power in negotiations with a behemoth like China. Previously, the UK was very positively inclined to Chinese investment, and it required a leadership change and a deteriorating security situation to significantly alter the government's outlook.²² It is therefore likely that the government will aim at maintaining a semblance of balance between not dissuading Chinese investment (excluding in sensitive sectors), yet also following a security policy line that is close to confrontational against China. The government is likely to persist in its attempted balancing act until either the security situation deteriorates, or Washington clearly requires the UK to stand even further in line with the US.

The UK sees Russia in harsher terms than China. The government considers Russia "the most acute threat" to British security, and frequently signals a hard-line approach towards Moscow.²³ A different political stance would also be difficult to maintain, as Russia has attempted and carried out several assassinations on British soil and frequently targets the UK through cyberattacks and other mischief. Russia also lacks China's economic heft, and thus the business community is less keen on maintaining open and amicable relations with Moscow.²⁴ Unless Russian actions substantially improve, the UK will maintain its present approach to Moscow.

Despite its stern descriptions of state actors, the British government finds it unlikely that systemic competition will escalate into high-intensity warfighting, at least in the near future. Instead, the government emphasises that systemic competitors, such as Russia and China, are more frequently using various tools of coercion and interference, including espionage, sabotage, assassination and disinformation, to pursue their goals, frequently referred to as sub-threshold activities (below open fighting).²⁵

16 Garnett, Mark & Mabon, Simon & Smith, Robert. *British Foreign Policy since 1945*. Routledge: London and New York, 2018. p. 2.

17 Mills, Claire & Brooke-Holland Louis & Walker, Nigel. *A brief guide to previous British defence reviews*. House of Commons Library, 26 Feb 2020, p. 3.

18 *The Integrated Review*. p. 24.

19 *The Integrated Review*. p. 70.

20 Philip, Catherine. 'Britain accuses China of 'systemic' global cyberattacks'. *The Times*. 19 July 2021.

21 The UK's ban on Huawei in building the 5G network is illustrative. House of Commons Committees: Defence Committee. *The Security of 5G.*, pp.30-60.

22 'China, Britain to benefit from 'golden era' in ties – Cameron', *Reuters*, 18 Oct 2015.

23 *The Integrated Review*, p.18.

24 There is evidence, although not open, of course, showing Russian money is 'laundered' through London, and the government is actively trying to reduce this. Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament: Russia. Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2020.

25 *Integrated Operating Concept*.

The government asserts in its strategy documents that, to manoeuvre successfully in great power competition, the UK will coordinate its actions more closely. “Integration” is *the* term that runs through all the documents, and is often in their titles.²⁶ Government ministries, agencies and bodies are to increase their coordination in their actions towards other actors, including adversaries.²⁷ The idea of greater government integration builds upon earlier British thinking, such as the Comprehensive Approach and the Fusion doctrine, but the new degree of proposed integration between UK government actions indicates a rise in ambition.²⁸ Although theoretically sound, government integration at the level proposed is very difficult to achieve, primarily because government apparatuses are large. To get all the government’s limbs to work in synchrony is, at the very least, a significant undertaking. Moreover, it is difficult to assess how well anchored and understood the integration idea is within and across the many actors that are supposed to carry out UK policy. It is possible that more “integration” is supposed to blind observers from seeing the defence capability cuts that are simultaneously introduced (see further, below).²⁹

A significant new concept that has been introduced involves a distinction between “operating”, and “warfighting”.³⁰ The reviews explain “operating” as actions to compete with the great powers, but primarily below the threshold of open warfare.³¹ This means, for example, that the armed forces will deploy more regularly and for longer periods, in order to show presence in various theatres, such as the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the South China Sea.³² The government has also demonstrated this by showing

the flag of naval vessels outside Crimea, and by having its carrier strike group sail through the Indo-Pacific, in 2021. The strategy papers discuss “warfighting” but emphasise that this is the last resort. Moreover, judging by some reductions in defence capability (see further, below), it appears to be given less emphasis than “operating”.³³

The descriptions offered, of Russia and China and their behaviour, raise several troubling questions. Research shows that those countries are investing significantly in modernising their armed forces and, most tellingly, conduct exercises at scale to increase their capacity for high-intensity warfare.³⁴ The UK, however, is announcing reductions in its armed forces, in both personnel and the number of large platforms. It also appears set to reduce its contributions to large military exercises in Europe and other places.³⁵ Thus, the government’s own assessment of the state actors’ behaviour, and the UK’s subsequent reductions in military mass, do not necessarily correspond with the latest research. Is the focus on sub-threshold threats (or “operating”) an effect of a genuine belief in the incarnation of the threats, or an effect of what the government can afford? If one cannot presently afford defence capabilities for the full spectrum of competition, it is likely cheaper to emphasise sub-threshold threats, even with the accompanying defence tech investments.

However, the government appears to realise that great power competition, without substantial high-intensity, fighting-power capabilities, carries risks. The announced increase in the nuclear warheads cap, from the previous 180 to the new 260, thus equals an extended ultimate insurance policy.³⁶ It is not clear, however, whether the

26 *The Integrated Review; Defence in a Competitive Age; Integrated Operating Concept*.

27 *Integrated Operating Concept*, p. 9-11; *Integrated Review* p. 19.

28 House of Commons, Defence Committee. *The Comprehensive Approach*, 2010; HM Government, *National Security Capability Review*, March 2018, p. 10-11.

29 Brooke-Holland, Louisa. *Defence Command Paper 2021: equipment cuts*. House of Commons: Library. 30 March 2021; Brooke-Holland, Louisa & Dempsey, Noel. *UK Army to be reduced to 72,500*. House of Commons: Library.

30 *Integrated Operating Concept*, p. 12-13.

31 The UK avoids using the term “hybrid”. Observers will recognise that while the government means “hybrid” or “grey zone”, it prefers to describe such actions as “sub-threshold”.

32 Referred to in UK documents as “persistent engagement”. *The Integrated Review*, p. 69.

33 Brooke-Holland, Louisa. *Defence Command Paper 2021: equipment cuts*. House of Commons: Library. 30 March 2021; Brooke-Holland, Louisa & Dempsey, Noel. *UK Army to be reduced to 72,500*. House of Commons: Library; Watling, Jack. ‘Rangers Lead the Way – But Who Follows?’, RUSI, 27 April, 2021.

34 Norberg, Johan. *Training for War – Russia’s Strategic-level Military Exercises 2009-2017*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2018; Office of the Secretary of Defence. *Military and Security Developments involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*. Department of Defence.

35 Brooke-Holland, Louisa. *Defence Command Paper 2021: equipment cuts*. House of Commons: Library. 30 March 2021; Brooke-Holland, Louisa & Dempsey, Noel. *UK Army to be reduced to 72,500*. House of Commons: Library.

36 *The Integrated Review*, p. 76.

government has systematically considered the costs associated with the warhead increase, and the ripple effects it may have on other defence acquisitions.³⁷ Coupled with the normal cost growth of defence materiel, the nuclear insurance policy might thus end up creating even larger risks down the road.

THE EURO-ATLANTIC, AND A DROP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC?

The UK says it prioritises the Euro-Atlantic. The government is well aware that British security cannot be decoupled from European security, and the *Integrated Review* states that Britain's "commitment to European security is unequivocal".³⁸ Brexit has reduced the possibility of engaging with the EU, but the union has never been a significant player in hard security and defence. The UK's commitment to European security can be categorised in three ways: deepened engagement with NATO and other cooperation formats; increased defence capability made available to NATO; and maintaining the special relationship with the US, in order to keep the superpower engaged in Europe.

First, the UK sees itself holding a leadership position within NATO and intends to deepen engagement with the alliance and individual alliance members. NATO has been at the heart of British defence for a long time and the latest strategy documents reaffirm this. The British will stay in the Baltics, through NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), and the Army will increase prepositioning in Germany.³⁹ In November 2021, the UK also announced plans to base armoured vehicles in Germany, as part of a new regional land hub there. If achieved, this would constitute a reversal of UK policy.⁴⁰ It has been a long time since the British Army of the Rhine reigned in Germany; the last regiment left in 2020, but the recent announcements are at least small signs that the UK intends to maintain

its material commitment to the continent. Moreover, the UK intends to use the multinational Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) further. London appears to see JEF as a vehicle to deepen cooperation around more initiatives. Despite the rocky relationship with Paris, due to AUKUS, the UK wishes to deepen defence cooperation with Paris by building on the Lancaster House Treaties, of 2010. At that time, the countries committed to deepening their defence relationship.⁴¹ The degree of this last objective's success will be worth following in coming years.

The UK means to support the deepened diplomacy with Europe with more hard capabilities, perhaps particularly through what the UK sees as its "convening power".⁴² The UK does not want to engage unilaterally in war – only together with others. For example, the UK can deliver hard capability in the form of two aircraft carriers, albeit one at a time, and would want others to join a strike group on deployment. This could partly explain conflicting messages, for example that the Carrier strike group is a "sovereign" capability, but also "permanently available to NATO".⁴³ "Convening power" may also be applied more broadly – the UK can draw together actors that individually may lack some capability, but with the UK's help, a group of like-minded countries can achieve what they would not be able to individually (JEF is one example). Another possibility worth considering is that the UK, US, and France will reach an agreement to have one aircraft carrier always available in the North Atlantic.

However, other British capability choices may not rhyme well with what NATO needs. Many analysts have observed that the suitability of the alliance's military capabilities compares unfavourably with Russia's, its presumed opponent in Europe.⁴⁴ At several NATO meetings, as well as through declarations and capability targets, the members have also stated the need to invest more in hard capabilities to counter Russian advantages.⁴⁵ It was thus

37 Plant, Tom. 'Britain's Nuclear Projects: Less Bang and More Whimper'. RUSI, 22 January 2020; National Audit Office, 'Managing infrastructure projects on nuclear-regulated sites', 10 January 2020.

38 *The Integrated Review*, p.11.

39 *The Integrated Review*, p. 72.

40 Hughes, Laura. 'British armoured division returns to Germany amid Ukraine tensions', *Financial Times*, 25 Nov 2021.

41 For a thorough study on UK-France relations: Alice Pannier, *Rivals in Arms: The Rise of UK-France Defence Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. McGill Queen's University Press, 2020.

42 *The Integrated Review* P. 11, 18, 21, 44.

43 *Defence in a Competitive Age*, p.14.

44 See for example: Frisell, Eva-Hagström & Pallin, Krister (ed.). *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020: Part 1: Collective Defence*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2021.

45 See for example: NATO, Wales Summit Declaration, 2014.

unlikely that London's decision to reduce personnel in the Army and in the number of platforms across all service branches was what the alliance members were hoping for.⁴⁶ One might as a result interpret the British commitment to NATO to be entirely on the UK's terms, not on what NATO actually needs.

The UK's most important ally is the United States. This has not changed with Brexit or the release of new strategy documents, rather the opposite: post-Brexit, the relationship has become more important. Moreover, London sees its relationship with Washington as a bearing pillar in the wider transatlantic relationship, which warrants a brief assessment of it in this section of the paper.

Politically, the UK and US hold similar views on the most important questions, e.g., on great power competition and the need of furthering advanced science and technology. Regarding individual matters, there are regular disagreements and differences. The US's recent withdrawal from Afghanistan illustrated this. The UK wanted to stay in-country, but Washington was firmly committed to keeping its departure schedule. When the British PM called the White House to voice his concerns, President Biden only returned his call after 36 hours. But neither did Biden speak to any other foreign leader before he spoke to Johnson. Other contentious issues include the lack of a US-UK free trade agreement, differing views on Northern Ireland, and Washington's fear that the UK will not be as useful in Europe as it was before Brexit. Moreover, the PM and the President are not the closest of friends. Biden appears to view Johnson as a populist, while Johnson does not appear to be enamoured by Biden, either. Yet despite multiple issues, the UK still enjoys unique access to, and ability to understand, Washington's corridors of power.⁴⁷

Militarily, the two countries' armed forces work almost seamlessly. Both the UK and US are aware of the declining immediate military value the UK brings to US operations.⁴⁸ Yet London goes to great lengths to ensure that the UK's defence is fully interoperable with US forces. It

is in this light that one should see the strong emphasis on the importance of technology in the armed forces, as well as in the wider UK society. With the Americans forging ahead in the technical transformation of their forces, the UK cannot risk becoming unable to operate together with them. Almost a thousand British defence personnel are serving in the US, distributed across 30 states. Across the globe, British service personnel are integrated into US staffs, postings and headquarters.⁴⁹

The UK, however, is not immune to the geopolitical and geoeconomic trends that lead to the Indo-Pacific. In line with the US and other Western states, the UK views the Indo-Pacific as the growth engine of the world economy, and at the centre of security tensions. The government thinks the UK's presence in the region will deliver economic benefits to the UK and help shape the security environment there over time.⁵⁰ Consequently, London presents ambitious diplomatic, economic, and military goals for its engagement there.

First, the UK aspires to be the European country with "the broadest and most integrated presence" in the Indo-Pacific.⁵¹ This presence will encompass the diplomatic, economic, and military realms. Diplomatically, the thinking goes, London will engage more deeply with regional organisations such as ASEAN and its regional allies and partners. Economically, London intends to enter into trade partnerships, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Its defence diplomacy will increase through stationing more defence attachés in the region. London also intends to channel more of its overseas development funds into supporting its actions in the other realms.⁵² In short, this is a comprehensive engagement package.

Second, the government wants to raise its military presence in the Indo-Pacific, principally through maritime deployments, exercises and various partnerships.⁵³ The newly formed Carrier Strike Group (CSG), led by the HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, toured the region in 2021. Whilst

46 Brooke-Holland, Louisa. *Defence Command Paper 2021: equipment cuts*. House of Commons: Library. 30 March 2021; Brooke-Holland, Louisa & Dempsey, Noel. *UK Army to be reduced to 72,500*. House of Commons: Library.

47 Schake, Kori. *Safe Passage: The transition from British to American Hegemony*. Harvard University Press, 2017.

48 Roberts, Peter, 'Time for a New UK-US Relationship', *IISS*, 19 Jan 2021.

49 Ministry of Defence. *British Defence Staff in the USA*.

50 *The Integrated Review*, p. 66-67.

51 *The Integrated Review*, p. 66.

52 *The Integrated Review*, p. 67.

53 Patalano, Alessio. 'Why is a British Carrier Strike Group heading to the Indo-Pacific?', *War on the Rocks*, 11 Aug 2021.

on deployment, the CSG exercised with allies and partners, including the US and Japan.⁵⁴ The AUKUS security partnership, with London's "Five Eyes" partners, the US and Australia, was a significant manifestation of the ambitions the UK intended for its presence in the region.⁵⁵ Moreover, the UK has several bases in the region: naval facilities and airfields in Bahrain, Qatar and Diego Garcia; and a jungle warfare school in Brunei. These could become hubs from which London can show the Union Jack and engage with its partners in the region. However, despite announcements of establishing a more persistent presence in the Indo-Pacific, overall, the military presence it envisions in the region will likely be small. London lacks the resources to stay for extended periods and to independently supply its forces.⁵⁶ Consequently, its small military contribution will be symbolic, and is unlikely to shape significantly the security environment in the region.

The UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific is a demonstration of London's willingness to show relevance in the international system, and a significant part of London's grand strategy makeover. But London appears to think it can compete 'on the cheap', primarily through showing some symbolic presence and helping its allies in the region help themselves – such as through AUKUS. However, it is hard to imagine the UK's commitment to the region, at least militarily, being sustainable. It is also unclear how the UK's aim of being the European country with "the broadest and most integrated presence" in the region will compare with that of its ally, France, a country with a significant Indo-Pacific presence, through its overseas territories and deployment of 8000 soldiers.⁵⁷

Two principal factors will likely constrain Britain's ability to fulfil her ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. The UK lacks a tradition of connecting ambitions with allocated budget resources. Despite pronouncements that it is different this time, it is not immediately clear how or why that is the case.⁵⁸ Second, Britain will likely follow what the US wants

her to do. In one scenario, Washington might informally force London to double down on the Euro-Atlantic.⁵⁹ The US will likely become even more focused on China in coming years and might then indicate to London that the US should handle the Indo-Pacific, and thereby reduce the danger of London overcommitting itself. Ironically, the ultimate consequence of Britain's vaunted tilt might be a more serious security role in the Euro-Atlantic.

TECHNOLOGY: OH, SHINY SILVER BULLET?

A striking feature of the *Integrated Review* and its accompanying documents is their focus on technology; it is a bearing theme and often comes first. Traditionally, many security analysts have considered technology as mostly a way to solve problems. Instead, the British government asserts that technology has itself become a critical metric and foundation of national power, at the centre of great power competition, which thus warrants the principal role ascribed to science and technology in the UK's foreign and domestic policies.⁶⁰

London professes two goals. First, Britain aims to grow its collective science and technology power. To do so, the government has announced investments across emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT) to enable the country's science ecosystem to develop further. Second, the UK wants to sustain its prominent role in cyber, more specifically by being a "responsible and democratic cyber power".⁶¹

To achieve this, the UK intends to grow the share of research and development (R&D) in the economy to 2.4 per cent of GDP to 2027, with directed investments into, e.g., national academies. Britain's R&D spending, in 2019 at 1.74 per cent of GDP, is below the average in the OECD countries of 2.5 per cent, making the government's investment plan appear well-needed.⁶² In defence and security, London will invest 6.6 bn GBP into R&D to pursue artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing and other

54 Mahadzir, Dzirhan. 'U.S., U.K. Aircraft Carriers Drill with Japanese Big Deck Warship in the Western Pacific', U.S. *Naval Institute*, 4 Oct 2021.

55 Five Eyes refers to the intelligence-sharing partnership between the US, UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

56 Stubbs, David. 'Waving a Small Stick at China', *The Wavell Room*, 25 June 2021.

57 French Ministry of foreign affairs. 'The Indo-Pacific region: a priority for France', 15 Nov 2021.

58 Interview with representative of the Swedish Armed Forces.

59 'Britain "more helpful" closer to home than in Asia, says US defence chief', *The Financial Times*, 27 July 2021.

60 *The Integrated Review*, p. 35.

61 *The Integrated Review*, p. 35; The UK consistently ranks among the top three countries in cyber capabilities, globally. Voo, Julia & Hemani, Irfan & Jones, Simon & DeSombre, Winnona & Cassidy, Dan & Schwarzenbach, Anina. *National Cyber Power Index 2020*. Belfer center, Harvard Kennedy School, 2020.

62 Rhodes, Chris & Hutton, Georgina & Ward, Matthew. *Research and development spending*. House of Commons Library, 2 Sep 2021.

technologies. This latter investment is part of the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) four-year budget settlement, in which the defence budget will grow by 16.5 bn GBP, or about 10 per cent, up to 2024.⁶³

The main issue the UK faces, together with many countries, is that it currently takes too long to move from basic research into applications. Thus, the problem is not only financial; procedures and institutions also play a role. London aims to tackle this by setting up new government bodies and making greater use of existing institutions. The Defence and Security Accelerator, a cross-government unit, will find and fund new tech. Its mission is broadly similar to the newly established Advanced Research and Invention Agency, modelled on the US's Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).⁶⁴ Once again, the inspiration drawn from the US is easily recognisable. Finally, to fulfil the goal of enhancing the UK's cyber capability, London has established a National Cyber Force, made up of contingents from the MoD's Strategic Command (formerly Joint Forces Command); the signals intelligence agency, GCHQ; and the Secret Intelligence Service, SIS.

London envisions that technology will work as a force multiplier and benefit the entire UK and its government and increasingly be at the centre of great power competition.⁶⁵ This competition will especially manifest itself in defence and security.⁶⁶ Defence chiefs also have an overarching vision of moving from "sunset tech" (older, legacy systems), to "sunrise tech" (emerging and disruptive technologies), with investments in AI, sensors, precision missiles, upgraded armour and unmanned platforms; the vision will have significant consequences for force posture, but a description of its details falls outside the scope of this paper.⁶⁷

The descriptions and analysis of technology's role in contemporary international politics are in tune with much of the research literature.⁶⁸ Recent years have shown that EDT is often at the centre of the competition between the US and China. Examples range from semiconductors and data applications to the 'race' for unmanned platforms in several domains. London sees this competition heating up and does not want to fall behind. Thus, as the head of the British Armed Forces recently expressed it, "We are... taking a significant bet on tech".⁶⁹

However, the UK's approach carries risks. The government asserts that it can fund and efficiently steer all these investment projects, but many budget accountability reports of recent years have heavily criticised its budget management, especially the MoD's. A few years ago, the National Audit Office even argued that there were virtual "black holes" in the MoD's budget planning.⁷⁰ There are indications that relations between the Treasury (Finance Ministry) and MoD have recently improved, and that the MoD has exerted itself to ensure that the budget is realistic.⁷¹

Nevertheless, there are grounds for scepticism. For one, there is little tradition in UK government of matching resources to ambitions. Second, defence reviews and the MoD have historically shown unwarranted optimism in technology projects, and those projects have often fallen short of their stated goals. In a recent report, a parliamentary committee stated that it was "extremely disappointed and frustrated by the continued poor record of the Department [MoD]".⁷² Thus, it is far from certain that these projects will become what the government appears to view as almost a silver bullet.

63 The standard budget is one year. *Integrated Review*, p. 100-101; Prime Minister's Office. 'PM to announce largest military investment in 30 years'. 19 Nov 2020.

64 *The Integrated Review*, p. 38; HM Government. Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA): policy statement. 19 March 2021.

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CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: B FOR EFFORT, BUT MUCH TO DELIVER ON

London has produced a series of strategy papers that intend to guide Britain towards 2030. Those papers present analysis of the UK's security environment, and announce steps to address the situation. However, as this paper identifies, there are several concerns regarding the coming years.

First, the domestic political situation will likely continue to present challenges. Covid-19 hit Britain hard, and the government has had to borrow significantly to fund its response. The Conservative Party also has ambitious domestic priorities, such as its "levelling up" agenda, which will likely siphon off resources and attention. If forced into a corner, it is not clear that the government will prioritise the 'Global Britain' agenda.

Second, although the threat perception and geographic priorities seem aligned, the government's means to address its goals here are also limited. The UK considers Russia the most acute threat to British security, and accordingly wants to maintain a prominent position in NATO and European defence. However, its will to show relevance globally, and to contribute to shaping the security environment in the Indo-Pacific will likely force the government to make difficult choices. For example, the UK's aircraft carriers can only be in one geographic theatre at any given time, as only one carrier will be available at a time, because of maintenance and refits. Overall, there is a risk of overstretch, with Britain attempting to navigate between Europe and the

Indo-Pacific, but without a safe harbour in either region. Third, the government's assessment of the importance of technology aligns with much published research, and with the assessment of its most important ally, the United States. However, Britain's poor record of managing defence budgets is not quickly fixable, and a government cannot easily cancel already agreed contracts without incurring significant costs. For the UK's technology investments, much has to go London's way in coming years if they are to prove their worth.

Finally, strategy is about making choices, of course. Perhaps most important is to know what to do less of. From the documents and discussions, it is not immediately clear what the UK intends to do less of. Indications can be derived, for example, from the different lengths of the *Integrated Review's* sections on state threats (8 pages) and on conflict and instability (1 page). But what the UK means to deprioritise is never written explicitly or said publicly. These types of strategy documents are always compromises between many government stakeholders, yet the government's role should be to adjudicate. If the government has adjudicated and actually made hard choices, it should have been more transparent.

Events retain the never-ending quality of upending even the best actors' road maps and, at the end of the day, the best strategist is the one who is able to adapt his or her strategy as the future unfolds. London will have to prove able to parry blows and adjust its bearings as those events hit. ■

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