

The UK's Integrated Review and NATO's north-eastern flank

Piotr Szymański

In March 2021, the UK's government published the Integrated Review – a new vision for the country's security, defence, development and foreign policy until 2030. A few days later, it released a supplementary defence strategy reshaping Britain's military capabilities. Both documents represent the culmination of the national debate on the UK's international role after Brexit. They contain an ambitious concept of a Global Britain – an innovative country more strongly engaged in the world in terms of trade, diplomacy and military presence. Britain sees Russia as the main challenge to the Euro-Atlantic area, which is essential for the UK's security, and China as the number one challenge globally. At a time of growing and permanent international competition, the UK has announced the biggest increase in its defence spending in decades. This is aimed at a technological leap forward in the Armed Forces, enhancing the nuclear deterrence and strengthening the Navy. However, this will come at the expense of some capabilities. From the perspective of the north-eastern flank countries, it is a positive sign that the UK aspires to be the most militarily capable European member of NATO, and that it relies on close military cooperation with the United States and the countries in the Nordic-Baltic region. On the other hand, there are concerns about personnel and materiel cuts in the British Army, which will limit its ability to deploy larger forces on NATO's eastern flank in the event of a conflict with Russia. At the same time, the UK's plans to increase its military presence in the Indo-Pacific do not appear to compete with its current military involvement on the eastern flank, which is the second largest after the US.

How does the UK see itself in 2030?

The Integrated Review¹ specifies the concept of Global Britain which has been promoted by the Conservative Party since the Brexit referendum. Already the party's 2017 manifesto declared Britain a global nation, with a global history and future.² With the withdrawal from the EU and the shifting balance of power in the global economy, the UK wants to reinvigorate its non-European trade, diplomacy and military activities. In order to become more effective on the international stage, it will

¹ *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, Cabinet Office, 16 March 2021, gov.uk.

² *Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future*, Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017, conservatives.com.



seek a greater synergy between different ministries and departments, for instance by merging the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office. It has also declared a leading role ('a force for good') in protecting human rights, providing development aid and dealing with global challenges such as climate change, pandemics or terrorism. A pile-up of old and new threats, growing international rivalry, and the rise of autocratic states made Britain increase its defence spending from £40bn to £47.6bn between 2020 and 2025 (according to NATO figures, it was \$64bn or 2.3% of GDP in 2020).³ This represents their largest spike in decades. At the same time, Global Britain will continue to rely on the special relationship with the US, NATO collective defence, activity in the United Nations and British soft power. Despite the Global Britain narrative and the bold rhetoric of the Integrated Review, the UK sees itself as a middle power and aims at strengthening ties with other middle powers, such as Germany, France and Japan, interested in upholding an open international order.⁴ The new strategic documents have been hailed by British experts as the most ambitious attempt to conceptualise the country's post-Cold War foreign and security policy. Nevertheless, the Integrated Review has faced multi-faceted criticism. This concerned the lack of clear priorities and the gap between aspirations and budgetary reality (especially in the context of the post-Brexit economic difficulties), or pushing aside the security cooperation with the EU.⁵ It has also been pilloried for several inconsistencies. These include coupling the moral imperative to support poorer countries with significant cuts in development aid, or sounding the alarm over the threat from Beijing while still putting economic partnership with China at the heart of efforts to diversify post-Brexit trade.⁶

Marrying the Euro-Atlantic focus and the Indo-Pacific tilt

The UK perceives the world increasingly in terms of a clash between democratic and authoritarian states (the latter involves mainly Russia and China). Therefore, alongside investing in its own military capabilities, Britain will seek to strengthen and revitalise its global network of military alliances and partnerships.

In security and defence policy, London will continue to rely on close cooperation with the US (interoperability, defence equipment) and as part of NATO, as its vital

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security interests are closely linked to the Euro-Atlantic area. In NATO, the UK wants to assume the role of the pivotal ally capable of reinforcing all flanks – from the High North, through the Baltic and Black Seas, to the Mediterranean. In addition, it will develop interoperability with Paris as part of the UK-French Combined Joint Expeditionary Force and with smaller Northern European countries as part of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). The JEF is made up of contingents from the UK, the Netherlands, and the Nordic and Baltic countries. Under the JEF construct, London wants to form one of two littoral response groups, which will be dedicated to NATO's defence and deterrence tasks. The UK intends to invest in securing sea lines of communication in the North Atlantic, hence it emphasises the significance of closer cooperation with the US, France, the Netherlands and Norway in anti-submarine warfare. It also points to Germany as an important ally in Europe.

³ *Spending Review 2020*, HM Treasury, 15 December 2020, gov.uk; *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2021)*, NATO, 11 June 2021, nato.int.

⁴ This order should be embedded in open economies and societies, i.e. in multilateralism, flow of trade, capital, data, ideas and talent, protection of human rights and democratic values, and established international rules and norms for largely unregulated spheres (cyberspace, emerging technologies, data protection, space). M. Chalmers, *The Integrated Review: The UK as a Reluctant Middle Power?*, RUSI, March 2021, rusi.org; *Global Britain in a Competitive Age...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–55.

⁵ I. Bond, 'Can the UK be secure if Europe is not? The UK's (un)integrated review', Centre for European Reform, 28 April 2021, cer.eu.

⁶ J. Landale, 'UK aid budget: Charities call £500m cut a tragic blow', BBC, 21 April 2021, bbc.com; Ch. Parton, 'China in the Integrated Review', Council on Geostrategy, 19 March 2021, geostrategy.org.uk.

The new defence strategy lists Poland as a key NATO flank state together with Greece, Turkey and Spain. As for intelligence cooperation, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (the Five Eyes community) will remain Britain's closest partners.

The UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific is one of the major innovations of the Integrated Review. The new strategic documents envis-

” **The Indo-Pacific tilt is a part of the Global Britain vision and the Royal Navy will be the UK's main asset there.**

age closer military cooperation within the Five Power Defence Arrangements (with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore) and with India, Japan and the Republic of Korea. The Royal Navy will be the main British asset there. The UK's carrier strike group, offshore patrol vessels (from 2021), littoral response group (from 2023) and, in the future, Type 31 frigates are to deploy periodically in the Indo-Pacific. In this theatre, the UK will focus on tailored and spot reinforcements of the US and regional allies' operations aimed at upholding freedom of navigation. A policy of bringing troops back 'east of Suez' has been in place for several years, but has so far applied mainly to the Middle East. In 2018–2019, the UK opened naval bases in Bahrain and Oman.⁷ Given the lessons learned from Afghanistan and Iraq, it seems unlikely that the UK would engage its Land Forces in a prolonged out-of-area operation in the coming years. The future design of the British Army is more of rapid response than stabilisation forces.⁸

Setting the scene for 'sunrise capabilities'

Global Britain's ambition is to maintain its place in the vanguard of global innovation, research and science. The defence sector has an important role to play in this endeavour. Higher defence spending is intended not only for the Armed Forces to recover from materiel shortages, but also to increase investment in new military technologies.⁹

The UK is seeking a cutting edge in competition with China or Russia in areas such as space capabilities, unmanned systems, cyberspace and artificial intelligence. A British upper hand on the battlefield is to be ensured by long-term investments in the development of: autonomous mine hunting systems, directed energy weapons, next generation cruise and anti-ship missiles, swarming drones, electronic warfare, network-centric solutions, stealth technology and the 6th generation aircraft.¹⁰ This is the way for the UK military to achieve a higher level of pace and readiness and to prepare for hybrid warfare, characterised by the growing use of advanced weapons also on the part of non-state actors. The UK will therefore attach increasing importance to the two younger operational domains – cyberspace and space. The government plans to publish a new cyber strategy and the first national space strategy in 2021. One of the main tasks of the newly-established National Cyber Force is to develop offensive capabilities in cyberspace. According to the government plans, the UK will have the ability to launch British satellites from its territory by 2022. A separate Space Command will also be established soon.¹¹

The transition from traditional conventional warfare to high-tech military capabilities ('sunset' and 'sunrise' capabilities) was widely debated during work on the Integrated Review, which heralds a technological revolution in the Armed Forces. However, in the end funds for defence R&D will remain at the current level until 2025.¹² This calls into question the UK's ability to step up military innovations.

⁷ P. Szymański, 'The consequences of Brexit for the UK's security policy and NATO's eastern flank', *OSW Commentary*, no. 299, 3 April 2019, osw.waw.pl.

⁸ J. Lindley-French, 'Global Britain or Little Britain?', *The Lindley-French Analysis: Speaking Truth unto Power*, 24 March 2021, lindleyfrench.blogspot.com.

⁹ J. Rogers, 'The Integrated Review: Five key innovations', *Council on Geostrategy*, 17 March 2021, geostrategy.org.uk.

¹⁰ The Tempest programme, which also involves Italy and Sweden, is aimed at designing a successor to the Typhoon fighter.

¹¹ C. Mills, 'Integrated Review 2021: emerging defence technologies', *House of Commons*, 25 March 2021, parliament.uk.

¹² To this end, the Ministry of Defence will allocate £6.6bn by 2025. M. Chalmers, *The Integrated Review: The UK as a Reluctant Middle Power?*, *op. cit.*

A new deal for the Armed Forces

The UK is putting the modernisation and expansion of the Royal Navy at the forefront of military investments. Its current combat capabilities in terms of destroyers (6) and frigates (13) has reached a historical low.¹³ By 2030, the Royal Navy tonnage is to increase by approximately 50% (compared to the level envisaged in the previous strategy from 2015). The new defence strategy¹⁴ sees the Navy as the backbone of the UK's global power projection thanks to the two Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers with F-35B aircraft. However, until the 2030s, it will only be able to generate one carrier strike group on its own due to the insufficient number of surface escorts, sailors and carrier-based aircraft.¹⁵ Building four new nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (Dreadnought-class) to ensure the continuous at sea deterrence for decades to come, is the Navy's top-priority programme. By the end of the decade, the UK will spend around £44 billion on the nuclear deterrent (approximately a quarter of its total equipment expenditure).¹⁶ The Integrated Review envisages an expansion of the nuclear weapon stockpile by increasing the cap from 180 to 260 warheads. Investments in the Navy will also have an important political dimension, securing orders to shipyards in Scotland.

Despite an additional £3 billion for the Land Forces' new equipment, the British Army appears to be the greatest loser of the Integrated

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Review's military reshuffle. Over the last few decades, it has been the most underinvested military branch, with the modernisation of the armoured infantry frozen.¹⁷ Changes are expected in coming years – the British Army will receive Boxer armoured personnel carriers and Ajax armoured fighting vehicles (AFV), but Warrior AFVs will be scrapped. 148 Challenger 2 tanks will be upgraded and the remaining 79 will be retired. The Army's enhanced combat readiness will be provided by a newly-established combat aviation brigade, equipped with AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, and the new rapid-reaction Ranger Regiment for special operations. Short – and long-range artillery as well as ground-based air defence systems (short – and medium-range) will also be procured. In 2030, the British Army is set to be quantitatively smaller, but with greater firepower. Self-sufficient brigade combat teams are the foundation of the new structure of the Land Forces. However, the modernisation plans are overshadowed by the reduction in the number of troops in the Army from 76,000 to 72,500 in 2025 (the 2015 strategy set their size at 82,000). This will make it even more difficult for the British Army to combine tasks related to collective defence and participation in out-of-area deployments.

The release of the new strategic documents has also fuelled speculation on the downgrading of the Royal Air Force (RAF). Indeed, the Integrated Review makes no mention of the previously planned purchase of 138 F-35 aircraft, confining itself to the statement that the F-35 fleet will be expanded beyond the 48 aircraft already ordered. The total number of RAF aircraft will be reduced. The oldest Typhoon fighters, Hawk training aircraft and C130 Hercules transport aircraft will be withdrawn. The helicopter fleet will also be affected by the cuts. The E-3D Sentry early warning and control aircraft will be replaced by the newer E-7A Wedgetail. Noteworthy among the reinforcements is the introduction into service of nine P-8A maritime patrol aircraft and 16 long-range Protector surveillance and strike drones.

¹³ 'When will the Royal Navy have 24 frigates and destroyers?', *Navy Lookout*, 17 March 2021, navylookout.com.

¹⁴ *Defence in a Competitive Age*, Ministry of Defence, 22 March 2021, gov.uk.

¹⁵ During her maiden deployment, the HMS Queen Elizabeth is supported by three destroyers (including one US) and three frigates (including one Dutch). There are 18 F-35B aircraft on the flight deck (eight belonging to the RAF and ten to the US Marine Corps).

¹⁶ *The defence equipment plan 2019*, Ministry of Defence, 27 February 2020, gov.uk.

¹⁷ *Obsolescent and outgunned: the British Army's armoured vehicle capability*, Defence Committee, 14 March 2021, parliament.uk.

The eastern flank perspective

The new vision for the UK's defence policy and its future military posture is ambiguous from the viewpoint of the north-eastern flank countries. The Integrated Review emphasises the importance of British contributions to the NATO enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Estonia and Poland. It also argues for a more proactive and forward military presence in other regions vital for the UK's security interests. In fact, since 2017, participation in eFP battlegroups in Estonia and Poland has served as an important military lab for this kind of 'outpost' deployment of British troops. Therefore, despite the UK's appetite for the Indo-Pacific tilt, a reduction of its military footprint in the Nordic-Baltic region (directly linked to the defence of Britain) or – more broadly – on NATO's eastern flank seems unlikely in the coming years. The UK is fairly well-anchored in the region, which is manifested in military and political formats such as the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force or the Northern Group. It is possible that a stronger US Armed Forces commitment to contain China may even increase the allied demand for the UK's military presence in the Euro-Atlantic area.¹⁸ The new strategic documents also stress the need to secure freedom of navigation in the Black Sea in cooperation with Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey. In addition, the UK will continue its capacity building mission in Ukraine in order to strengthen the country's resilience to Russian aggression. This mission focuses on land and maritime training. Regarding Belarus and Russia, the UK is ready to use its independent sanctions policy (after leaving the EU) to respond more quickly and effectively to the actions of non-democratic states.

For the eastern flank countries, the UK's firm commitment to NATO (highlighted by Brexit) is reassuring. London has declared that it

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will permanently attribute littoral strike forces and a carrier strike group to NATO's collective defence and deterrence. The latter, alongside the UK-led Land Forces brigade, was already declared as Britain's contribution to the NATO Readiness Initiative in 2020.¹⁹ It has also committed the UK's offensive capabilities in cyberspace to NATO's needs. However, significant personnel and materiel cuts in the British Army are causing concern on the eastern flank.²⁰ For the UK, these will mean that it will be increasingly difficult to field a full warfighting division to support the region in the event of a conflict with Russia (as part of the implementation of the NATO Defence Planning Process commitments). The credible deterrence of Russia relies on the ability to reinforce NATO's small battalion-size battlegroups on the eastern flank. Meanwhile, according to some experts, the new strategic documents confirm the UK's abdication from plans to engage sizable land combat formations in the defence of continental Europe.²¹ On the other hand, the announced end of the era of large-scale out-of-area operations may lead to greater availability of the UK's forces for NATO collective defence.

The UK's role in the defence of NATO's north-eastern flank can be inferred from its participation in international military exercises. The Royal Navy is preparing to protect the sea lines of communication in the North Atlantic, as well as to reinforce the defence of Norway's High North²² and the Baltic states, as demonstrated by the JEF exercises in the Baltic Sea.²³ The first military support to Norway and the Baltic states would also involve the Royal Marines, paratroopers from 16 Air Assault Brigade, a UK unit

¹⁸ M. Chalmers, *The Integrated Review: The UK as a Reluctant Middle Power?*, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ 'UK further commits to NATO and European Security through JEF Readiness Declaration and deployment of Typhoons to Lithuania', Ministry of Defence, 12 February 2020, gov.uk.

²⁰ M. Hurt, 'The UK's Integrated Review Is Not Reassuring from a Baltic Perspective', ICDS, 29 March 2021, icds.ee.

²¹ J. Lindley-French, 'Global Britain or Little Britain?', *op. cit.*

²² P. Szymański, 'High North, high priority – Norway and the defence of NATO's northern flank', *OSW Commentary*, no. 393, 12 May 2021, osw.waw.pl.

²³ 'Action-packed demonstration for UK task group in Estonia', Royal Navy, 5 July 2019, royalnavy.mod.uk.

assigned to the land component of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, and a highly capable Air Force. At a later stage, the British Army would jump in on a larger scale. Despite the withdrawal of all units from Germany between 2010 and 2019, it has retained 250 soldiers there and large storage facilities with prepositioned military equipment. This is intended to speed up the deployment of the Land Forces to the continent, including to Poland and the Baltic states.