



Can the UK be secure if Europe is not?

The UK's (un)integrated review

by Ian Bond, 28 April 2021

Having identified the Euro-Atlantic area as its home region and Russia as the most acute threat there, the British government must not ignore the EU's role as a security partner.

Next month, the Royal Navy's largest ever vessel, the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, will begin its first operational deployment. It will head for India, Japan and South Korea (among other places). The voyage will be a signal to the US (as an ally) and China (as a potential adversary) that the UK can once again bring military power to bear in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. The choice of destinations for the carrier and its accompanying ships (which include an American destroyer and a Dutch frigate) reflects the 'Indo-Pacific tilt' proclaimed in the UK's [Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy](#), published in March 2021.

The review claims to be "a comprehensive articulation of the UK's national security and international policy". But security developments in and around Europe in the weeks since its publication – in particular the [heightened Russian threat](#) to Ukraine – have shown that the review is neither as integrated nor as comprehensive as it claims. In particular, there is an EU-shaped hole that can only make it harder for the UK to pursue its security interests where they are most pressing: in what the review describes as "our home region of the Euro-Atlantic".

The review sets out well the likely international environment over the next decade and the threats that the UK faces or is likely to face. It recognises the challenges posed by the rise of China and the shift of the world's economic centre of gravity to Asia – both trends that are likely to continue for some decades to come. But it also says, rightly:

- ★ The Euro-Atlantic region will remain critical to the UK's security and prosperity.
- ★ Russia will remain the most acute direct threat to the UK.
- ★ The US will continue to continue to ask its allies in Europe to do more to share the burden of collective security.

Based on these three points, the Euro-Atlantic area ought to be the focus of UK defence and economic efforts for at least the next decade. The more operational parts of the review and of the accompanying [Command Paper](#) on defence do not reflect this analysis, however.

The review says that the UK will establish “a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country” in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, though it seems that only limited resources, whether military or diplomatic, will be shifted eastwards permanently as part of this ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’. The defence Command Paper describes the region as “the crucible for many of the most pressing global challenges” in the decades to come; it speaks of increased involvement in capacity building and training there, longer and more consistent military deployments and an increased maritime presence. From 2023, one of the UK’s two new ‘Littoral Response Groups’ (a Royal Marines unit permanently at sea, ready to intervene in crises) will be based in the Indo-Pacific region, with frigates to follow later in the decade.

In the case of Russia, the defence Command Paper sets out a number of specific steps to strengthen defence and deterrence. The UK will have more military equipment stored in Germany in case it has to reinforce the continent of Europe; small forces will continue to be based in Estonia and Poland; it will contribute to NATO’s standing naval forces; and it will play a bigger part in NATO exercises. But the integrated review does not offer a joined-up, multi-departmental strategy to mitigate the risks that Russia poses, despite the blunt statement that it remains the most acute direct threat to the UK.

It is possible that the government’s approach is set out in the classified cross-Whitehall Russia strategy, approved by the National Security Council in 2016 and updated in 2019. The five pillars of the strategy were summarised in the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee’s [report](#) on Russia, published in July 2020, as ‘protect’, ‘constrain’, ‘engage’, ‘keep open’ and ‘build’. These pillars seem to emphasise a positive agenda of engaging with Russia, keeping open channels and building a better relationship more than the need to limit the damage Russia can do to the interests of the UK and its allies.

There are a number of places where the review could have highlighted the problems caused by Russia and the ways in which the UK proposed to deal with them, but it does not do so:

- ★ Russia (along with China) “invests heavily in global cultural power projection and information operations”, according to the review. One way in which Russia does that is through propaganda channels like RT and Sputnik. At present, the decision on whether to allow them to continue operating in the UK is left to the independent broadcasting regulator, Ofcom. It has recently taken away the broadcasting licence of their Chinese counterpart, CGTN, in part on the grounds that CGTN is ultimately under the control of a political movement, the Chinese Communist Party. Yet RT has not faced the same threat, even though it forms part of Russia’s information operations in the same way that CGTN contributes to China’s. The integrated review is silent on whether current regulations are adequate to deal with such state-directed broadcast propaganda.

- ★ The review recognises the need to make democracy in the UK more resilient and to ensure the integrity of elections – but then becomes distracted by voter ID proposals designed to eliminate insignificant levels of voting-day fraud. It ignores the problem of money flowing to UK political parties (primarily the Conservatives) from individuals closely connected to Russia and in some cases associated with its security and intelligence services.

- ★ When it comes to serious organised crime, there are plenty of references to tackling illicit finance, but little explicit recognition of the link between dubiously-obtained wealth from the former Soviet

Union, invested in the UK and its overseas territories, and penetration of the British establishment by individuals linked to the Russian regime. The Intelligence and Security Committee identified these issues in its report.

The 'Indo-Pacific tilt' is also not balanced by a plan for repairing damaged relations with European partners. The integrated review fails to recognise the EU's central role in Europe's stability and prosperity, or consider whether it might serve UK interests to work more closely with the Union. The review rightly emphasises the continued importance of NATO to the defence of Europe. But NATO and the EU, with 21 members in common, have been working together since the 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine to respond to various sorts of hybrid threats, such as information warfare and cyber-attacks, that are below the threshold for a NATO military response but could still be very damaging to European security. The two organisations are also co-operating on issues such as improving the ability of military forces to move around Europe in response to a crisis, by investing in transport infrastructure and simplifying border-crossing procedures – both EU rather than NATO responsibilities. One reason for the closer relationship between the two organisations is that the UK, as an EU member-state, successfully argued the case for it. It is paradoxical that the UK is now largely cutting the EU out of its approach to European security. The review states that the UK will continue to support closer practical co-operation between NATO and the EU, and EU-NATO crisis management exercises, but the defence Command Paper does not mention the EU at all, even in these limited contexts.

This blindness to the EU's contribution to European security is consistent with the current British government's decision not to have an institutional relationship with the EU in the defence and foreign policy spheres. Only on page 60 of the review does the government say that the UK's "European neighbours and allies remain vital partners", with whom it will work to defend common values, counter shared threats and build resilience in its neighbourhood; and acknowledge the EU's role in the peace and prosperity of Europe. Even then, the review focuses on the UK's bilateral relationships with European countries, as though they themselves were not operating in an EU framework. Even in the area of sanctions, where it ought to be obvious that co-ordinated UK and EU action will almost always be more effective than UK action alone, given the size of the EU economy, the integrated review focuses on the "agility of our autonomous sanctions" rather than how to enhance their impact by working with others.

At the root of the review's weaknesses lies the problem of balancing the three "fundamental national interests" it identifies: sovereignty, security and prosperity. By privileging the first regardless of the consequences for Britain's relations with the EU, the review limits the UK's ability to pursue the second and third. This problem extends beyond the defence sector: the achievability of the integrated review's ambitions for the UK to be "a Science and Tech Superpower" and "at the forefront of global regulation on technology, cyber, digital and data" depends on the UK's ability to collaborate with others with larger research and development budgets to invest, and bigger markets to regulate.

A government elected to 'get Brexit done' is bound to stress the value of the UK's new freedom of action. But at some point, it needs to recognise that if Europe is insecure, the UK will also be insecure. As long as most European states are part of the EU or aspire to join it, the UK's best hope of ensuring the security and prosperity of its neighbourhood, and thereby its own security and prosperity, is to collaborate with the EU as well as individual member-states. And as long as Russia threatens the security of the UK's European allies and (former) EU partners, the UK's defence, intelligence and diplomatic resources should be configured accordingly.

The EU cannot be the whole answer to all the problems that the integrated review identifies. But nor does the UK have unlimited resources to respond unilaterally to all of them. China's growing economic heft and international assertiveness threaten some of the UK's closest partners; India is a rapidly growing economy but an increasingly troubled democracy; authoritarian countries like Vietnam and Egypt are becoming bigger players in their regions, sharing some interests but few values with the UK; Africa is of ever greater global significance, and Nigeria is [projected](#) to be the world's third most populous country (after India and China) by 2050. In almost every case, the UK would do better to craft its policies in co-operation with like-minded partners than on its own; and where better to find them than on one's doorstep? However unwilling Boris Johnson and some of his ministers are to admit it, even after Brexit the UK's future remains inextricably linked to that of the rest of Europe. Geography is still destiny.

Ian Bond is director of foreign policy at the Centre for European Reform.