

UK Integrated Review: a basis for more Euro-British cooperation?

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The UK's Integrated Review is a blueprint for British foreign and security policy in the post-Brexit era.¹ It is the UK government's attempt to turn Boris Johnson's slogan of "Global Britain" into policy reality. Many of its key proposals - the ambitious defense spending plans, the nuclear modernization program and the "tilt" to the Indo-Pacific - have all generated headlines. But while the document gives a clearer sense of the UK's ambitions and priorities in the post-Brexit environment, it also raises a number of questions about the UK's relationship with Europe.

The review is truly an integrated effort. As the title says, it combines security, defense, development and foreign policy. With 133 mentions throughout the document, the authors could also have included trade policy in that list. The Review amounts to a comprehensive security strategy that the Dutch government – with its different, complementary yet competing security documents – can today only dream of. Prime Minister Boris Johnson oversaw the strategy's drafting, its lead authors worked out of Number 10 and it combines input from a range of departments. In pursuit of cross-government national security objectives, it combines defense, diplomacy, development, intelligence, security, trade and aspects of domestic policy such as the BBC, education and even sport. Last year's integration of DFID into the Foreign Office – creating the new FCDO, although accompanied by big cuts to the UK's development budget - was a precursor to the Integrated Review and signaled the UK government's intent to create a joined-up foreign policy.

THE POST-COLD WAR ORDER IS OVER

In the Review, the UK government presents a forward-looking ambition to shape international developments. It conveys a *Gestaltungswille*. Central to this is an understanding- and possibly a profound intellectual shift – that the existing international order should not

be preserved, but changed. The policy declares that “[the UK] will move from defending the status quo within the post-Cold War international system to dynamically shaping the post-COVID order, extending it in the future frontiers of cyberspace and space, and protecting democratic values.” The Review's authors write that “the international order is more fragmented, characterised by intensifying competition between states over interests, norms and values. A defence of the status quo is no longer sufficient for the decade ahead.” This premise offers the intellectual justification for a significant boost to the defense budget of 24.1 billion pounds over the next four years. It amounts to a rise of more than ten percent and pushes Britain's defense spending level comfortably over the NATO spending target of 2 percent of GDP.

To British eyes, the future security landscape will be shaped by competition between “democratic and authoritarian values and systems of government” and a “growing contest over international rules and norms.” The outcome of this competition will determine the future international order. As in other European capitals and Washington, it creates momentum to build an alliance of like-minded countries, that share democratic norms and values, and that are willing to counter the growing influence of autocratic countries, like China and Russia.



Prime Minister Boris Johnson oversaw the strategy's drafting, its lead authors worked out of Number 10 and it combines input from a range of departments. Depicted is Prime Minister Johnson leaving 10 Downing Street (2021) Ilyas Tayfun Salci / Shutterstock.com

As an initial step, as host of the G7 in 2021, the UK has invited three other democratic countries – Australia, South Korea and India - to join discussions on how to deal with economic and technological competition with China. This idea of a so-called D10 is also backed by senior US officials. China looms large in the Review, just as it does in Washington policy circles.

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The Review's rhetoric on China is very comparable to the EU's. In its 2019 strategy document, the EU called China a systemic rival, but also a commercial partner. The UK does the same. One important difference is that the EU seeks a balance with equal parts competition, cooperation and rivalry. The UK, however, appears to emphasize the element of rivalry. The focus on the Indo-Pacific is

a clear reflection of the growing political and economic importance of that region, and of increased strategic competition with Beijing. The Review notes that “China's growing international stature is by far the most significant geopolitical factor in the world today.”

In the space of five years, the UK has done a volte-face in its China policy. In December 2016, David Cameron and Xi Jinping were sipping a pint in a country pub and the British and Chinese delegations heralded a “golden era” of cooperation. In 2021, the UK launched a national security strategy heavily influenced by its competition with China. The UK's emphasis on a contest between democracies and authoritarian powers, along with a substantial increase in the defense budget and a more antagonistic approach to China will go down well in Washington. And that could be deliberate.

“Global Britain” apparently means relying on an old friend. Many of the new plans and ambitions are presented with an eye to boosting ties with Washington and to impressing the US administration. As if, outside the EU, the UK

is seeking refuge in the “special relationship.” The “tilt” to the Indo-Pacific and the deployment of Britain’s new carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth to the region should also be seen in that light. As should higher defense spending, which leads the UK to declare itself the “leading European Ally in NATO.”

Indeed, by drawing a comparison with other European countries, the UK is portraying itself in a more favorable light to Washington. The document certainly contains some Johnsonian self-congratulatory bluster and one-upmanship. For instance, the Review declares that the UK will have “more satellites than anywhere in Europe.” Investment in Britain’s private technology is “ahead of the rest of Europe.” And it proudly declares that “in the decade ahead, the UK will deepen our engagement in the Indo-Pacific establishing a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country.” Further on, it reiterates that “we will be deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually-beneficial trade, shared security and values.” Though all this may be true, one gets the impression that the British government is trying to prove a point.

From a US perspective, the main strategic challenge is posed by China. Though the UK acknowledges that the most acute threat to Britain’s security is posed by Russia, London is posturing along lines similar to those followed by the US when it comes to China. Recent policies regarding Hong Kong and Xinjiang also point to greater alignment. More than other European countries, the UK is following Washington’s increasingly antagonistic stance. Together with a strong emphasis on US-UK security ties, the message to Washington is clear: if the US administration needs to call Europe, don’t call Brussels or Berlin, call London.

AN EU-SHAPED HOLE

While the Review is heavy on the UK’s relationship with the United States and renewed attention to the Indo-Pacific region, it is light on security ties with the European Union. The 114-page document contains two references to the European Union. A first sentence about the EU is a formalistic statement reflecting the current status of EU-UK relations: “Our Trade and Cooperation Agreement provides a basis for protecting our essential economic interests and cooperating as appropriate, while enabling us to pursue different economic and political approaches in many areas where this suits our interests.”



“Global Britain” apparently means relying on an old friend. Many of the new plans and ambitions are presented with an eye to boosting ties with Washington and to impressing the US administration. Depicted is Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaking to President Joe Biden from his office on No10 Downing Street (photo: Flickr / Andrew Parsons / No10 Downing Street / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



One of Britain's most visible moves is to dispatch the UK's new carrier strike group to the South Chinese Sea. Depicted is HMS Queen Elisabeth (photo: David Peter Robinson/Shutterstock.com)

In the second sentence the UK - in very general terms – says it will work with the EU where interests coincide to promote “stability and security of the European continent,” specifically referring to cooperation with the EU in the areas of “climate action and biodiversity.”

Though very sparse, this should not be surprising. The UK, of course, was never a strong proponent of the EU's foreign and security policy, and so it should not be expected to be one now. London also refused to discuss foreign and security cooperation in the Brexit negotiations. Still, the absence of a coherent approach to the European Union is remarkable, if not deliberate, and it raises the question to what degree “Global Britain”

means “anything but the EU”? The UK acknowledges that its primary focus is on Euro-Atlantic security. Can the UK credibly claim to be the largest power in Europe, without a foreign and security policy relationship with the EU? As former Foreign Secretary William Hague framed it, “When we were in the EU we necessarily obstructed integration on foreign and defence issues. Now we are outside and cannot be required to do anything against our will we can work with it.”²

The lack of attention to the EU is problematic when it concerns British ambitions in the field of trade. The document claims that the US is the UK's “biggest single bilateral trading partner” as a justification for investing in



ties with Washington. The statement is misleading as it omits the European Union, which is the destination of slightly less than 45% of British exports. Given the EU's exclusive competence on external trade, the EU – not the US - is the UK's largest trading partner. Probably, London does not want to be reminded of these facts.

The Review however is very clearly written in a post-Brexit mindset. Its authors see the British withdrawal from the EU as a liberating moment for Britain's foreign policy: "The ability to move swiftly and with greater agility, amplifying our strong, independent voice by working with others, will be the determining characteristic of the UK's foreign policy following our departure from the EU." In

other words, "Global Britain" is a Britain liberated from sloth-like EU. A consequence is that the UK will focus on diverse and small groupings of member states, including the E-3, Five Eyes intelligence cooperation, the G7, or even the Quad. The problem is none of these smaller groups are suddenly open to UK participation because of Brexit. The UK was already a member of most of them. Only the UK's ambition to join the 11-country CPTPP Pacific free-trade agreement would not have been possible while it was inside the EU. But these eleven countries around the Pacific rim have no intention to coordinate their foreign policy positions.

The Review is based on the belief that the future is all about being adaptive and flexible. Is this true or is this a convenient ex-post justification for leaving the European Union? Brexit has allowed the UK to develop an au-

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tonomous sanctions policy, and Britain has been able to move more quickly than the EU to impose sanctions on countries like Belarus. This is an obvious benefit of Brexit. But the effectiveness of sanctions is not determined by the speed with which they are enacted – though this matters too – but by their content and by the degree to which they are enacted and enforced in a synchronized way across large trading blocs. US-EU cooperation on a sanctions regime is more important than whether the UK by itself is able to impose economic measures. In short, when it comes to sanctions, size matters.

Size also matters when setting trade rules and establishing regulatory norms. The UK states that it wants to put more effort into so-called regulatory diplomacy. When it was a member of the European Union it was able to ensure the EU took British interests into account when negotiating on regulatory issues. Due to the size of the EU single market, London had a good chance the EU would get its way at the negotiating table. The UK will have difficulty getting its way by itself, now that it represents an economy one-sixth the EU's size.

For a smaller country, building regulatory clout means accepting the rules that others make. For the UK this means either aligning with EU regulations, signing up to CPTPP rules or negotiating a bilateral regulatory chapter with the United States. There is one area in which the UK could boast having real regulatory power and that is



The UK to declare itself the “leading European Ally in NATO.” Depicted is a British Army Challenger 2 Main Battle Tank (MBT) during NATO exercise Spring Storm 19 in Estonia (2019) (photo: Flickr / NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organisation)

in financial services and financial innovation. But, while the Review acknowledges the soft power of the BBC and British sport, the Review omits any reference to the City of London as a source of national power. It is a missed opportunity.

The UK also says it is a “soft power superpower.” But that claim is difficult to align with the damage that the Brexit process has done. Undeniably, the UK will continue to be an attractive place to live, work and invest, but its decision to leave the Erasmus student exchange program, introduce a more restrictive migration policy, reduce development funding, as well as demonstrate its willingness to violate international law has reduced, not increased, Britain’s soft power. Though the United Kingdom retains a significant reserve of soft power capital,

its image as an open and tolerant society has taken a hit. Addressing these issues – improving the UK’s soft power, strengthening its regulatory diplomacy and being a leader in European security matters – would benefit from mending fences with the European Union.

MORE EUROPEAN THAN YOU THINK

Ultimately, despite only scant attention being paid to the EU, European and British foreign and security policies will remain very close. Firstly, despite “Global Britain’s” attempt to do things differently, the Review fits within the scope of today’s European security debate. European- and British – security will first and foremost be shaped by events on the European continent. This means the UK will need to stay abreast of them, and remain involved. Besides, all European states are grappling with the ques-



tion of how to deal with a potentially reluctant United States, tensions with Russia and an assertive China. The Integrated Review offers one answer, but it is not so different from French, German or EU thinking. There is also a strong likelihood that - absent a structural foreign policy arrangement with the EU – France, Germany and the UK will gradually seek to formalize an E3 foreign and security dialogue.

Secondly, the UK puts a strong emphasis on NATO and working bilaterally with European governments. France, Germany and Ireland feature prominently in the document. The Netherlands is second-tier, alongside Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey. The UK sees these countries as sharing Britain's focus on "values, free trade and a commitment to trans-

atlanticism." The UK's Joint Expeditionary Force is also increasingly a vehicle through which London will seek a security dialogue with Scandinavian countries, as well as the Netherlands.

Thirdly, the UK's departure from the EU has practical implications, which the UK will need to address to meet the ambitions in the Review. The UK has lost defense-industrial influence by leaving the EU. If it wants to maintain a military technological edge, it would benefit from plugging into EU initiatives such as PESCO projects, as well as continuing to cooperate with the European Intervention Initiative.

Finally, Britain's ambition to join the CPTPP, sail an aircraft carrier through the South China Sea, and become an ASEAN Dialogue Partner are tangible examples of its reorientation to the Indo-Pacific. But the UK is not the only European country pivoting to Asia. In the Indo-Pacific, the UK wants to work with European countries, particularly France and Germany. It is worth remembering that in 2019, the three countries published a joint statement on the South China Sea. France, Germany and the Netherlands see a role for themselves in the Indo-Pacific and the EU is working on a strategy for the region which should appear in September this year. France was the first European state to describe itself as a "power in the Indian and Pacific oceans" in its 2013 Defence White Book. Furthermore, one of Britain's most visible moves is to dispatch the UK's new carrier strike group to the region. Perhaps it is a strong symbol of "Global Britain," but alongside HMS Queen Elizabeth will sail a Dutch frigate. Instead of taking the lead in tilting to the Indo-Pacific the UK is simply the next European government to do so. It offers grounds for further foreign and security cooperation between the continent and Britain.

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