

# UK Defence Policy after Ukraine: Revisiting the Integrated Review

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## Abstract

*This article argues that the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy signified a major change in UK defence thinking because it placed China as the foremost threat to long term security interests. The resulting 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific region resurrected the prospect of a defence role that the UK had relinquished in the 1960s. Yet the article contends that the UK could ill-afford to become a significant defence actor in the Indo-Pacific area. Rather, the UK can play a role in encouraging actors within the region to take the lead in countering China. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022, has reinforced the logic that the UK should concentrate its strength on bolstering the deterrent power of NATO within the Euro-Atlantic area.*

## Introduction

The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (henceforward the Integrated Review, IR) was published in March 2021 and billed as the most significant re-assessment of the UK's defence and foreign policy priorities since the end of the Cold War.<sup>i</sup> It announced a significant 'tilt' in the UK's defence policy towards the Indo-Pacific region, on the grounds that China now represented the foremost danger to security interests. Although Russia was acknowledged to be a major threat, its long term significance was outweighed by China. The Russian war against Ukraine, that started on 24 February 2022, throws the assumptions of the Integrated Review into doubt. There have been calls for the Integrated Review to be fundamentally re-appraised in light of the new geo-strategic realities resulting from the conflict. For example, the retiring head of the British Army, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, has contended that cuts to the British Army, envisaged in the IR, should be reversed.<sup>ii</sup>

The decision in the IR to tilt towards the Indo-Pacific resulted from a number of mutually reinforcing drivers. One was the return of great power tensions. After a period of fighting

insurgency conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the threat of major inter-state conflict was once more dominating the international agenda. A second driver was China's investment in military capabilities to match its growing economic ascendancy. It had been widely assumed that China's rise would be accompanied by its political liberalisation, but instead, the country has become more authoritarian under its President Xi Jinping. Richard Moore, the head of the UK's Secret Intelligence Service, declared that China represented the greatest long term challenge.<sup>iii</sup> A third was the re-alignment of America's priorities. Initiated under President Obama and then intensified under Presidents Trump and Biden, America designated China as its leading concern and adjusted its economic and security policies accordingly.

The elevation of the threat from China in British threat perceptions was significant because it supplanted a position that had long been accorded to Russia. Ever since the Cold War, the Soviet Union and then its successor, Russia, was viewed as the UK's primary security challenge. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was seen as a declining power whose strength was off-set by the United States. This afforded the UK the opportunity to engage in 'Wars of Choice', such as the wars of 1990-91 and 2003 against Iraq and in 2011 against Libya. Despite its period of re-armament that began in 2007,<sup>iv</sup> Russia was perceived to be an actor likely to employ hybrid means, such as unattributed operations and cyber attacks, rather than engage in a major conflict.

By undertaking a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Putin has exhibited a propensity for risk-taking that exceeds the worst fears of his critics. He even hinted that Russia could resort to the use of nuclear weapons. This raised the possibility of the war escalating to a direct conflict between the Russian Federation and NATO, either as a result of deliberate policy or miscalculation. Putin's actions have resulted in the deepest sanctions ever imposed upon Russia. NATO members have funnelled defensive weapons to Ukraine and taken steps to reinforce the Alliance's forward presence in Eastern Europe. The assumptions on which the Integrated Review was based have been thrown into doubt by the new overriding priority of deterring further Russian aggression.

This article argues that the basic analysis of the Integrated Review remains sound: namely that China is the most significant long term threat to the West's interests. In comparison, Russia represents an acute threat, but a lesser level of overall danger. Due to geography, however, the UK is in a position to play a more significant role in addressing the challenge

posed by Russia, rather than China. This fact has been accentuated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This article will justify this argument by looking first at the way the Indo-Pacific region was treated in British defence policy in the past and the new challenge that it presents today. The UK's desire to remain America's closest partner has encouraged it to become more heavily involved in Asia, but its ambitions are at risk of leading to overstretch. The UK would be better advised to encourage its allies in the Indo-Pacific to focus their energies on China. The article will then examine the argument that the war in Ukraine has made it necessary for the UK to re-assess its priorities. It will contend that it would be most appropriate for the UK concentrate on deterring Russia.

### **The UK's Past and Present Posture in Asia**

In the post-1945 period the UK was a significant military power in Asia. As a member of the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) it possessed important bases within the region, such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Its forces fought in conflicts, such as Borneo, and it maintained defence commitments in Brunei. Even after granting independence to Malaya in 1957, the UK continued to uphold defence obligations to the territory in the form of the Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia treaty (ANZAM), that led to a protracted confrontation with Indonesia until 1966.

Yet the UK's attitude to the defence of Asia during the Cold War was secretly ambivalent. Whilst it was a signatory to treaty commitments, it was sceptical about the role that the region would play in a global war. Not only did the UK lack resources that it could devote to the theatre in war-time but it also held a low opinion of the fighting capability of some of its allies, like Pakistan.<sup>v</sup> It regarded its involvement in Asia through the prism of both the Cold War and the potential for limited war. As regards the former, the UK believed that treaties such as SEATO would help stiffen the resolve of regional members to resist communist subversion, but were of little relevance in an East-West conflict. The treaty was of political rather than military utility. As regards limited war, the UK wanted to be capable of assisting a friendly power against a regional aggressor. Bases like Aden accorded the UK the ability to project power into the Indo-Pacific area but only for operations that were of limited size and scope.

It was for good reasons that the Far East was accorded a lower priority in UK Cold War defence planning than either Europe or the Middle East. UK forces were diminishing in size and could not sustain a global defence posture. By the 1960s the 'East of Suez' role was consuming an unsustainable 25% of the defence budget.<sup>vi</sup> The decision by Secretary of Defence Denis Healey not to build a successor generation of large-aircraft carriers ended the prospect of maritime force projection. It was reinforced by the choice in 1967 to withdraw all forces East of the Suez Canal and close bases such as Aden.<sup>vii</sup> UK defence efforts became focused on the Euro-Atlantic area because this was the primary threat to national interests as well as the only affordable course of action.

Today the risks posed by China are drawing the attention of the UK back towards the Indo-Pacific. The nature of that threat is complex and presents the UK with dilemmas. China is a great power whose strength is on a trajectory to rival the US. Since 2011 it has been increasing its defence spending by an average of 9% per year and it is at the forefront of many conventional weapon technologies and is expanding its nuclear arsenal.<sup>viii</sup> China has been pressing its claims to the South China Sea with its so-called "nine dash line" and the fortification of islands.<sup>ix</sup> It has built up considerable military forces opposite Taiwan and regularly probed its air defences. China has been enlarging its naval power, both as a means to challenge US dominance in the western Pacific and as the foundation for a blue water navy with bases overseas. It has conducted non-military offensive operations such as cyber attacks, including the hacking of computer systems to steal commercial secrets and intellectual property.

Such Chinese actions are contrary to international law and indicate that it seeks to undermine the existing liberal order. This has been reinforced by China's increasing authoritarianism, its crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong and its persecution of minorities in Xinjiang. It has been illustrated further by China's refusal to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the assertion of 'limitless friendship' with Moscow.<sup>x</sup> China has been closely aligned with Russia in its purchase of advanced weapons and its importation of oil and gas. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin now stand as autocrat leaders who are united in their opposition to the West and the values it represents.

Yet at the same time, China's economic strength makes it a country with whom the UK must engage and trade. China is technologically agile and possesses a huge internal market that

renders it resistant to economic pressures. It is harder to identify UK interests in the Indo-Pacific other than for open trade and the absence of conflict. The need to engage with China have been exemplified by the UK becoming a member of the Asian Investment Bank and by its application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Efforts to manage the economic risk from China have included preventing it from constructing new nuclear reactors on British soil as well as removing the technology company, Huawei, from involvement in the UK's fifth generation digital infrastructure.<sup>xi</sup>

The UK's tilt towards the Indo-Pacific is motivated, therefore, by a fear of an increasingly assertive China and the desire to be supportive of states in the region who are vulnerable to Beijing's intimidation. In the Integrated Review the UK indicated its earnestness by a significant budgetary increase in defence spending of £24 billion over the next four years in order to expand its defence envelope and take on new commitments in Asia. By increasing the overall size and scope of its armed forces the UK has drawn a line under past defence cuts and signalled its commitment to a new decade of investment.

However, historical experience demonstrates that the UK can easily exhaust its own resource base by trying to project power into the Indo-Pacific. Maintaining a strategic posture in this part of the world stretches UK spending and limits it to a modest contribution. Even though China may represent the most significant threat in the future, the UK is not the appropriate actor to lead in countering this challenge. Rather, coordinating with allies in the region offers the best prospects for the realisation of 'Global Britain's' ambitions. This means that the UK must work hard to mobilise allies within the Indo-Pacific in order to carry the greatest proportion of the burden. Otherwise the UK could face cuts in future defence reviews resulting from the demands of trying to support two theatres, the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific.

### **Partnering with the US**

The US has been in the vanguard of countries expressing concern about the illiberal direction of China's policies and its military aggrandisement. Under both Presidents Trump and Biden it has stepped up its efforts to contain and sanction China. Britain's tilt towards the Indo-

Pacific must be seen within this context of changing US priorities. The UK has always sought to be America's 'partner of choice', as a way of maximising its influence in Washington. It has taken upon itself responsibility for acting as a bridge between the US and Europe. The British government has considered America's commitment to the defence of Europe as vital, but not inevitable. Therefore, contributing to the US stance in Asia has been viewed in London as a *quid pro quo* for Washington's support to NATO.

Whilst the Obama administration announced a strategic 'pivot' to Asia in 2011, the UK has made a much more modest 'tilt'. The task for the UK is to provide substance to its aspiration and avoid over committing itself in order to please its American ally. Its distance from the Indo-Pacific and the limitations of its force projection capabilities risks the policy being treated as hollow by allies and adversaries alike. The British Army does not foresee a role for itself in competition with China as there is no realistic possibility of fighting a land engagement in Asia. Similarly, the Royal Air Force has a limited relevance to the balance of military power in the Indo-Pacific. Its next generation Tempest programme offers the potential to remain at the forefront of aerial combat capabilities against adversaries such as China, but the ability to operate in the region without air bases is a major constraint.

It is the Royal Navy that enjoys the ascendancy in delivering a military contribution in the Indo-Pacific. This is ironic considering that the last two decades of insurgency conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in lean years for the Navy, as exemplified by the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and the 2015 Review.<sup>xii</sup> The inherent flexibility of maritime power, its ease of moving between theatres, its potent symbolism in peacetime and its ability to protect Pacific trade routes has made it especially relevant in the current circumstances. Just such a resurgence for naval power was envisaged by former First Sea Lord, George Zambellas, and US Chief of Naval Operations, Jonathan Greenert.<sup>xiii</sup>

A visible demonstration of the Royal Navy's ability to play a role in the region was the despatch of a carrier strike group (CSG 21), configured around *HMS Queen Elizabeth*, in May 2021.<sup>xiv</sup> On board the aircraft carrier was a complement of US Marine Corps F-35B jets and a US warship, the *USS The Sullivans*, was part of the strike group. CSG 21 conducted exercises in the seas off the Philippines with US Navy strike groups based around the aircraft carriers *USS Ronald Reagan* and the *USS Carl Vinson*. This was consistent with a long-standing UK

approach to the US: to show that American leadership was supported and its burdens shared by contributions from like-minded countries.

Nevertheless, even for the Royal Navy, the question remains how to demonstrate a substantive and enduring, rather than just symbolic, capability in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>xv</sup> Whilst the Royal Navy has acquired two new Queen Elizabeth class carriers, its surface fleet of Type 45 destroyers and Type 23 frigates has dwindled to just nineteen vessels, and this will make it difficult to provide the necessary defence in depth for a carrier strike group facing a sophisticated opponent.<sup>xvi</sup> A new 'Shipbuilding Office' has been created under the Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, to carry forward a new programme of naval construction, but there will be a hiatus before new ships can enter the UK inventory. Tony Radakin, the Chief of the Defence Staff and a former First Sea Lord, has promised to increase the availability of current destroyers and frigates by stationing ships overseas and rotating crews to the region to man them,<sup>xvii</sup> but such a small number of hulls remains a major constraint. The Integrated Review promised that a Littoral Response Group, based on Batch Two River Class patrol vessels, would be based in the Indo-Pacific with a complement of Royal Marine Commandos to form the kernel of an interventionary capability that could be supplemented by special forces or other naval vessels. Nevertheless, in the context of the rapidly increasing size of the Chinese Navy, this will be a very modest capability and risks disappointing Western allies.

### **Alliances in the Indo-Pacific**

While its technical capabilities enable the UK to be an important symbolic player in the Indo-Pacific, it should be under no illusion that it will be a substantive one. Instead, the capacity to mobilise allies will be key to the UK's contribution. Alone the UK cannot have a major impact in the region, but within a network of alliances it can help to galvanise other actors. In comparison, the 'Achilles Heel' of China's presence in Asia its lack of alliances, it enjoys little power of attraction towards any other countries.

The UK has important relationships with states in the Indo-Pacific. It is part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore and it has been developing an associate status with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

There is no comparable organisation to NATO within the Indo-Pacific, no organisation that provides clear defence obligations and standardises equipment and tactics. The UK's stated objective is to become the European country, 'with the most integrated presence' in the region.<sup>xviii</sup> The UK has reached out to countries such as India, Japan and Australia. Japan and India both have territorial disputes with China while Australia has faced economic pressure from Beijing because of speaking out on human rights issues. By placing itself within a web of Indo-Pacific relationships, the UK is seeking to ensure that China confronts an array of opposing countries.

On 15 September 2021 the UK announced that it would be part of a new defence pact, the Australia, UK and US agreement (AUKUS).<sup>xix</sup> Australia declared that it was entering into a partnership with the US and UK to build 8 nuclear-powered, hunter-killer submarines. Such submarines would offer greater endurance, speed and range and enable Australia to conduct offensive operations against Chinese shipping in times of war, and surveillance in times of peace. There are also discussions of the UK basing its own Astute class submarines in Australia, once construction of Australia's new fleet gets underway.<sup>xx</sup> Angus Campbell of the Australian Defence Force made clear that AUKUS was not the start of an Indo-Pacific version of NATO because such a strategic culture does not exist within the region.<sup>xxi</sup> Nevertheless, an important signal was sent by the fact that an Australian warship accompanied *HMS Queen Elizabeth* during its maiden voyage in the Indo-Pacific. Given Australia's strategic position, closer cooperation is a means through which the UK can exert greater influence on surrounding nations.

The two other countries central to the UK's strategy are Japan and India. Part of America's reconfiguration in the region has been based on an assessment that both India and Japan are willing to harden their stance towards China.<sup>xxii</sup> The UK has exploited this potential by strengthening its defence cooperation with Tokyo. The UK and Japan have declared each other to be their most important partners in Asia and Europe respectively.<sup>xxiii</sup> The UK has been the first foreign power outside of the US to hold military exercises with Japan since the Second World War, and both governments are currently negotiating a Reciprocal Access Agreement which would allow their militaries to cooperate more closely through exercises and personnel exchanges. Japan is considering joining the Tempest project and if it were to do so, it would add industrial weight to the programme and usher in an unprecedented era of shared defence



industrial cooperation. Both countries have expressed concerns about the build-up Chinese military power facing Taiwan and former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in a speech to a think tank, said that Japan would treat a Chinese attack on Taiwan as a fundamental threat to the security of its homeland.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In the case of India, the UK has been eager to draw Delhi more tightly into the western embrace. India was invited to join the Group of Seven (G-7) meeting in Cornwall, in June 2021, alongside South Korea and Australia. Prime Minister Boris Johnson signalled that he would like to deepen the relationship between London and Delhi and exploit the historical links between the two countries. Yet there are limits to the intimacy that can be engendered as India's size and ambitions militate against it being seen as part of a western alliance. It was notable that the government Narendra Modhi refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations.

### **Focusing on Russia**

The risk of the tilt to the Indo-Pacific is that it draws the UK into a series of defence commitments that absorb increasing proportions of spending and military capability. An Asian dimension to defence policy will compete for resources that would otherwise be available for the European theatre.<sup>xxv</sup> The UK faces the prospect of trying to do too many things and not doing any of them well with adequate funds. According to the Integrated Review, Russia remains the most acute threat and the UK is best placed to concentrate its attention on the Euro-Atlantic region. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, an attempt to undermine the global order, reinforces this logic.

Russia presents a much greater threat today than it did in the two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has larger nuclear capabilities than China, with a strategic nuclear arsenal that it is actively updating. Russia's modernised military forces now pose a more substantial menace to the Baltic states and other frontline members of NATO. It has previously engaged in conflicts in its near abroad and overseas. Against Chechnya, Putin authorised the intensive shelling of the capital Grozny; in 2008 he approved the use of force against Georgia and in 2014 he sanctioned the occupation of Crimea. Overseas, Russia intervened to support President Assad in Syria.

The prelude to the invasion of Ukraine was perceived by countries such as France and Germany, and even by the government in Kyiv itself, as another Russian attempt to exert pressure. Warnings from the US and the UK about an imminent invasion were treated sceptically because no strategic benefit could be discerned for such a course of action. Yet Putin's speech of February 21<sup>st</sup> dismissed the legitimacy of Ukraine as a state. He appeared to believe that he could invade, overturn the government and secure a rapid victory. Instead, his forces encountered determined and agile Ukrainian resistance that was bolstered by sophisticated NATO anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons and intelligence support. Russian forces were handicapped by inexperienced command and control, poor vehicle maintenance and clumsy logistics. Britain's Defence Intelligence Service assessed that Russia was 'struggling to conduct offensive operations' and its image of invincibility had been punctured.<sup>xxvi</sup> By mid-April Russian forces had only made strategic gains in the south and had been repulsed around the capital. The Kremlin chose to concentrate its attack on the Donbas region where its supporters hold about a third of the territory.

The extent to which Russia has altered the security architecture of Europe is illustrated by the fact that formerly neutral states, such as Finland and Sweden, have turned towards NATO. The UK faces two sorts of demands. First, to contribute towards the deterrence of aggression by bolstering conventional military forces in NATO members bordering Russia. Britain already led the NATO battlegroup in Estonia and contributed to Baltic air policing: since the invasion it has doubled the size of its ground force presence. British heavy armour is also being returned to the continent to bolster the land capabilities of the Alliance. It will have to look again at the decision that was taken in the Integrated Review to reduce the size of the British Army from 82 000 to 72 000. Second, Britain recognises that contemporary strategic competition is frequently multi-domain and that it must be ready to counter Russian 'grey zone' threats such as cyber and information warfare. A National Cyber Force, launched in 2020, brings together the capabilities of both the Ministry of Defence, GCHQ and the intelligence services. The UK must be able to conduct persistent competition with Russia below the threshold of war, such as by resisting attacks on domestic critical infrastructure or protecting telecommunication satellites.

As well as its national defence policy, the UK is required to consider how best it can contribute to the cohesion of Europe in the face of Russia aggression. Its commitment to NATO is

undisputable and it has been one of the foremost providers of defensive weapons to Ukraine. In the words of the British government, it 'remains unconditionally committed to the security of Europe and our leading role in NATO'.<sup>xxvii</sup> Yet the Integrated Review failed to consider how the UK could cooperate with the EU in the aftermath of its withdrawal from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The war in Ukraine has shocked EU members, such as Germany, into reassessing defence priorities and the UK has the potential to play a role in ensuring that EU defence efforts are compatible with NATO. Following the negative experience of the Trump administration and the UK's Brexit, the EU forged ahead with various CSDP structures; the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Co-ordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD), the European Defence Fund (EDF) and its 'Strategic Compass'. As a major defence actor now outside of the EU, the UK has an opportunity to help the EU and NATO to cooperate more closely together. The failings of the UK's approach to cooperation with the EU have been exposed by Russia's actions in Ukraine. A British voice in the EU would have been beneficial in driving the EU towards providing greater aid to the Ukrainians in their struggle.

The UK can play an important role in ensuring that a common European front is sustained in relation to Russia. It has the wherewithal to reach out to France, Germany, Spain and Italy to encourage them to play a concerted role in European defence. This includes new areas of competition that have emerged: the high north is an area which Russia would like to monopolise, yet the UK has extensive experience of cooperating with Norway and has designs to develop deeper collaboration with Canada. It already plays a role as the framework nation in the Joint Expeditionary Force that brings together ten countries with an interest in the security of the north Atlantic.

## **Conclusion**

The Integrated Review marked a significant moment in post-Cold War UK strategic policy. Having identified two great powers, Russia and China, as its key security challenges, the UK confronted how to prioritise its efforts in the light of its limited defence resource base. Russia and China dominate two quite different theatres, and the UK must balance the deployment of its armed services for maximum effect. The Integrated Review's 'tilt' towards the Indo-

Pacific region was an attempt to address some of the challenges presented by China and signalled a shift in defence priorities. It aligned itself with the policies of the US, its most important military ally, as well as with the direction of the UK's economic interests. The UK was fearful that unless it made a contribution to the Indo-Pacific, the strength of the Anglo-American relationship would diminish. The actual level of its effort was always likely to be modest due to the huge distances involved.

The Integrated Review did not seek to shun the Euro-Atlantic region, which remained the UK priority in defence planning. Although it previously offered little prospect of energising the Anglo-American relationship, nevertheless, the UK's commitment to deterring Russia has been of long standing and a core policy interest. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has reinforced that calculus and helped to justify the UK's prioritisation of NATO in its defence policy. While America will still want to focus its own energies upon China, it will value those allies that step up to the challenge presented by Russia. Indeed, the UK may be able to backfill some of the roles vacated by American forces in Europe as they are re-deployed to Asia. Concentrating UK energies on the Euro-Atlantic region will be easier to rationalise to the US because the threat presented by Russia has grown. The force levels contained within the Integrated Review deserve to be reflected upon in the light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine but its fundamental strategic assumptions remain sound.

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