

**Incoherent, Under Strength, Over Stretched:  
The UK National Strategy and Defence Review 2021**

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### About the Author

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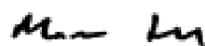
## Foreword

UK Defence reviews have a record of being heralded at the time of publication but then subjected to sharp criticism when the subsequent review is under discussion. Will this be the fate of the 2021 National Strategy and Defence Review?

Paul Cornish, the Cityforum Chief Strategist, who is a long-time good friend of the British military, delivers his appraisal of The UK National Strategy and Defence Review 2021, which he summarises as 'Incoherent, Under Strength and Overstretched'. He provides warnings and makes constructive suggestions as to how the United Kingdom should position itself in the period 2020-2030.

The Review paints a picture of the United Kingdom role in the world post the end of our membership of the European Union and looks to resume the kind of positioning across the world that the UK had until the Denis Healey 1968 Review removed our role East of Suez. It is interesting that Healey and his colleagues altered the stance of the UK in the period before our entry into the European Community. I had the privilege to be involved in a number of discussions with a Minister in the Healey team and was able to reflect the view that British ambitions were undeliverable in the late 1960s.

My experience around the globe as one of the Defence Lecturers supported by the Healey budget made it clear to me as I worked in Aden, the Gulf, Malaysia and elsewhere, that we should abandon our global defence positioning which was no longer convincing or affordable. It is interesting to see that after our departure from the European Union we propose two generations later to take on activities that the realistic Healey thought beyond us so many years ago. However, there are significant political and strategic possibilities for the UK. What can realistically be achieved is one of the main themes of the 2021 Intelligent Defence and Smart Power work that Cityforum is developing with the help of Paul Cornish and other Associates. Paul's paper on the 2021 Review will feature in this agenda as it is developed.



**Marc Lee**  
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## Incoherent, Under Strength, Over Stretched: The UK National Strategy and Defence Review 2021

Paul Cornish<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Following its victory in the December 2019 general election, the new Conservative government led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a policy review to address 'all aspects of international policy from defence to diplomacy to development'. In February 2020 Mr Johnson set out his government's approach to the forthcoming Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (otherwise known, thankfully, as the Integrated Review or simply IR). The rather cumbersome title (made longer still when it came to publication) reflected the imminent merger of the Department for International Development with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The title also expressed a move, underway for some years in UK government, to develop closer integration (or 'fusion') between those departments and agencies of government responsible for the UK's relations with the rest of the world.

With the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review widely seen to have made unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) promises, the case for another, more effective and enduring review was generally accepted. In 2020 that case became even more compelling, just as it became even less possible. The UK did not simply slip its moorings from the European Union in order to seek a new and distinctive position for itself in global politics; it did so as forecasters were warning of bad weather conditions in international politics. Challenges to global stability were many and various. Unease was deepening over China's and Russia's strategic intentions (and capabilities). The relationship between the United States and its European allies in NATO was showing signs of increasing strain, with the occasional hairline fracture beginning to appear. Western governments and commentators remained anxious about the prevalence of seemingly unfamiliar forms of conflict and warfare in which state and non-state adversaries make the fullest use of whatever political, social, diplomatic, technical, legal and military means they might have at their disposal. And all of this turbulence was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. With so many distractions, the much-needed review of the UK's security and defence posture and, particularly, the UK defence budget, dropped down the government's list of policy and decision-making priorities. If the case for the IR was compelling, so too was the case for its postponement. Initially scheduled for autumn 2020 (to coincide with the Comprehensive Spending Review), publication of the document was postponed to January and then to February until it was finally released on 16th March 2021<sup>2</sup>.

This essay is concerned with the defence elements of the Integrated Review and with *Defence in a Competitive Age*, the accompanying Defence Command Paper published shortly after the IR<sup>3</sup>. I summarise the content of these lengthy documents but do not attempt an exhaustive assessment of the minutiae of the defence posture they propose. More than enough expert analysis of budgetary allocations, equipment configurations and numbers and so on is available elsewhere. Instead, I will identify and comment upon the underlying perceptions and principles that seem likely to drive the

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to colleagues who read and commented upon earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: HMSO, CP 403, March 2021). [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/969402/The\\_Integrated\\_Review\\_of\\_Security\\_Defence\\_Development\\_and\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a competitive age* (London: HMSO, CP 411, March 2021). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-in-a-competitive-age>

size, shape and function of UK defence over the coming decade.

### Great Expectations

More or less since its announcement, expectations of the IR could scarcely have run higher – it was, after all, presented as ‘the biggest’ such reassessment ‘since the end of the Cold War.’ Expectations ran especially high for those wedded to the idea of ‘Global Britain’. The notion that the UK should claim its rightful place in the world has appealed to UK governments since the end of the Cold War, if not since the end of the Second World War, and it came to the fore as the UK’s departure from the European Union came closer. In June 2016, very soon after the Brexit referendum, the UK government launched its Global Britain initiative, and in 2018 established a Global Britain National Security Strategy Implementation Group under the auspices of the National Security Capability Review. Disconnected from the EU, the UK would nevertheless remain a mid-ranking power with close trading relationships and alliances in Europe and elsewhere. Given that it is also among the world’s largest economies, the UK would be neither alone nor destitute. Global Britain would not only be an advocate for free trade and respect for the rules-based international system, it would also take a more active role, using its soft power to uphold, modernise and strengthen the system, to maximise UK influence and to project the UK and its interests. Dominic Raab, the UK Foreign Secretary, spoke in late 2019 of ‘a truly Global Britain ... leading by example as a force for good in the world’, promising to ‘reinforce Britain’s role in the world as a good global citizen’ and to be ‘a doughty defender of the rules-based international system – the world’s best bet when it comes to tackling the challenges we all share.’ As well as achieving influence through the exercise of soft power, one former UK Defence Secretary also saw in Global Britain a distinct role for UK hard power, arguing that UK Defence ‘will be pivotal in reinforcing Britain’s role as an outward looking nation’ and promised to make use of ‘our global capabilities to strengthen our global presence’.

The Integrated Review would therefore be an historic achievement, it would satisfy an urgent need for policy recalibration and it would be a working demonstration of the United Kingdom’s ambition for itself and the world.

### First Impressions: The Integrated Review

The Integrated Review amounts to some 100 pages (having discounted the ten per cent of the document that is given over to title pages, blank pages, large graphics and whole-page illustrations of such things as the headquarters of the United Nations and an extremely large iceberg). The document begins with the Prime Minister’s ‘vision for the UK in 2030’ and then offers four substantive sections: Overview; The National Security and International Environment to 2030; Strategic Framework; and Implementing the Integrated Review. Each of these substantive sections is summarised below.

#### Overview

In ten pages the Overview sets out the main themes of the IR:

- The UK’s commitment to European security is ‘unequivocal’, not least through NATO and various bilateral defence arrangements.

- The rules-based international *system* (the mechanism of international politics formerly known as *order*) is ‘no longer sufficient’ and will require the UK and others to ‘reinforce’ its ‘architecture’.
- Liberal democracies should become more robust, resilient and self-confident, demonstrating the ‘benefits of openness’ to the rest of the world. But they can only do so if they first put ‘the interests and values’ of their own populace ‘at the heart of everything we do’.
- The most important interests of the British people are sovereignty, security and prosperity.

These themes are reflected in the Global Britain idea (discussed above). The reader is informed that, ‘in practice’, what Global Britain actually means ‘is best defined by actions rather than words’, as the words printed on page 14 of the document then go on to explain.

#### The National Security and International Environment

In a wide-ranging examination of state of the world, the second substantive section of the document begins by observing that the ‘nature and distribution of global power is changing’ as a ‘more competitive and multipolar world’ comes into view. This change can be attributed largely to four ‘overarching trends’:

- ‘Geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts’, including China’s ‘increasing power and assertiveness’ and the ‘growing importance of the Indo-Pacific’. There will be some continuities (the US will remain a superpower; the Euro-Atlantic will remain critical to the UK; and Russia will remain the ‘most acute’ threat to the UK. But China is the larger concern, because it is competing systemically, for a leading role on the ‘global stage’. The difficulty with China’s challenge is that the UK and other ‘open trading economies’ will nevertheless have to trade and co-operate with their challenger.
- ‘Systemic competition’. The intensification of competition between states and with non-state actors’ is a struggle for nothing less than ‘the shape of the future international order’, to be played out ideologically (democratic versus authoritarian systems), normatively (the rules and standards that govern international interaction), militarily, socially, economically and technologically.
- ‘Rapid technological change’ refers to those developments that will ‘reshape our societies’ and presents science and technology as a ‘metric of power’, even to the extent of becoming an ‘arena of systemic competition’.
- ‘Transnational challenges’ such as climate change and biodiversity loss, global public health, population movements, organised crime and terrorism will all be ‘tests of resilience and international cooperation’.

#### Strategic Framework

The bulk of the Integrated Review is to be found in a Strategic Framework which presents the UK government’s ‘overarching national security and international policy objectives’. Interestingly, whereas the IR as a whole is concerned with the period up to 2030, the Strategic Framework has a shorter life span, to 2025. This suggests that the framework is to be reassessed after four or five

years – a schedule that would be consistent with promises made in the 2010 National Security Strategy and the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review. There were doubts then, as now, as to the wisdom of making such promises and whether the imposition of a short-term, or at most medium-term review timetable (one which matches, more or less, the UK's five-year political cycle) could be said to be genuinely strategic. If the strategic perspective is foreshortened in this way, it might become both more important and more difficult to demonstrate that the defence budget represents *immediate* value for money. And if that test cannot be passed, the outcome could be a vicious cycle in which a short-term strategic outlook justifies a reduced commitment of resources, and vice versa.

The Strategic Framework has four 'overarching and mutually supporting objectives':

- Sustaining strategic advantage through science and technology.
- Shaping the open international order of the future.
- Strengthening security and defence at home and overseas.
- Building resilience at home and overseas.

In the course of 55 pages of written text, each objective is discussed in full and a comprehensive list of 'priority actions' is offered. No mention is made of actions which were not a 'priority', but the agenda is full enough in any case. Revealing something of the 'Covid-19 vaccination bounce' which is, justifiably, a source of pride (and relief) in UK government, the document celebrates UK achievements in science and technology (S&T) and sets course to become a capable and convincing 'S&T power' (or even, as suggested elsewhere in the document, a 'S&T superpower' – with do discussion as to what this might entail, or whether additional S&T funding might be needed to achieve this elevated status). With an array of funding commitments, institutional initiatives (including an Advanced Research and Innovation Agency) and other policies, this is perhaps the most eye-catching section of the IR. Admittedly, within days of publication of the IR awkward questions were being posed, by university vice chancellors and others as to whether S&T funding commitments were as straightforward and as appealing as at first they seemed.

The second objective, 'Shaping the International Order of the Future', will see the UK acting as a 'force for good' in the world, championing and defending open societies and economies, international co-operation, multilateralism, human rights, democratic values, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of the press and media and the transition to a zero-carbon global economy. Offering itself as a European country with 'global interests' so significant as to require a 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific, the UK will use all components of its national power and influence to achieve this lengthy agenda – diplomatic, S&T, development, legal and economic. The UK will also make use of its considerable soft power, even to the extent of becoming a 'soft power superpower' (once again, no further elaboration is provided). In some discussions prompted by the publication of the IR the suggestion emerged that soft power must be 'backed' or 'underpinned' by 'hard power' if it is to be effective. Thankfully, this misunderstanding of the soft power idea is not repeated in the document. 'Soft power' and 'hard power' are both, clearly, forms of power, but they are, rather importantly, not the same sort of power. Soft power is the power of influence, persuasion and attraction, whereas hard power is the power of coercion by whatever means appropriate (economic, diplomatic, trade, military etc.). To suggest that 'soft' is essentially derivative of 'hard' is probably to do away with the idea of soft power altogether, and to forego its benefits.

As hinted at by the title, and as most readers would probably expect, the third objective,

'Strengthening security and defence at home and overseas', makes a robust case for confronting security challenges and threats, internationally and nationally, from adversary states to terrorists and criminal organisations, using hard power and cyber power and working closely with allies and partners, particularly in the Euro-Atlantic area. It is difficult to see what has been excluded from this list of challenges and responses. The third objective also contains a clue as to what the 'integrated' element of the Integrated Review might actually mean; 'responding to state threats can no longer be viewed as a narrow 'national security' or 'defence' agenda. We must bring together the elements of our work across this Strategic Framework at home and overseas, and all the instruments available to government, in an integrated response.' The UK's defence posture will be 'modernised' for something described as a 'competitive age', which is presumably to distinguish the coming decade from other, non-competitive ages, and the armed forces will be configured both to 'fight major wars' and to 'operate as a 'flexible campaigning force', a term which is not explained. The most striking suggestion is that in pursuit of a more credible and effective national deterrent posture, the UK will 'deploy more of our armed forces overseas and for longer periods of time'. These are, of course, the same armed forces that will be steadily reducing in size over coming years. More predictably, nuclear deterrence will remain at the heart of the UK force posture, albeit with an unexpected increase in the maximum number of nuclear warheads from 180 to 260.

The fourth and final objective, 'Building Resilience at Home and Overseas', is in some respects an extension of the third. UK-wide national resilience will be essential if it is to 'withstand and recover from' the threats, hazards and crises it will confront. This makes good sense, if in a rather obvious way. More imaginatively, UK national resilience is also offered as a component of the UK's efforts at international leadership – 'global resilience' must be achieved if transnational challenges such as pandemics are to be addressed effectively. Another transnational challenge is climate change and biodiversity, the management of which is to be nothing less than the UK's 'foremost international priority'.

#### Implementing the Integrated Review

The final section of the document addresses what could be the most difficult part of the IR process – its implementation. It seems that much of what is required by way of 'integration' in UK government has already happened. This might explain why 'implementation', difficult as it is, is nevertheless covered relatively briefly. The National Security Council and National Security Adviser will be at the heart of the effort. Something described clunkily as 'strategy capability' will be essential to successful implementation, to include improvements in technological skills, strategic communications and futures analysis. A new office for Net Assessment and Challenge will be established within the MOD and a new, cross-government Central Digital and Data Office will ensure the secure and efficient handling of data and information. A new Performance and Planning Framework and an Evaluation Taskforce will check that progress is being made in the IR Strategic Framework. Government departments will prepare Outcome Delivery Plans, producing regular performance reports. Other performance monitoring mechanisms will also be used, such as the Government Major Projects Portfolio. Further strategies covering, for example, defence, resilience, cyber and international development, will be published in due course. As Thomas Edison might never have said, genius is only one per cent inspiration and the remaining ninety-nine per cent is perspiration. In other words, there is, it would seem, a good deal of sweaty work yet to be done to implement the IR.

## First Impressions: Defence in a Competitive Age

In the decades following the end of the Cold War the UK has attempted most conceivable types of defence review or policy framework – threat-oriented, capabilities-driven, effects-based, foreign policy-led and Treasury-constrained (although the last of these usually appears more as an accusation of cover-up and conspiracy than as a model for national strategy). In a refreshingly robust, military-style approach to the matter of adversaries, their intentions and capabilities, *Defence in a Competitive Age* places threat at the heart of things. The process leading to the Defence Command Paper began, readers are informed, ‘with assessing the threats we are encountering and anticipating, before considering how we should address them, and only then with which equipment, and what resources are required to field them.’ In the event, however, the 2021 version of a ‘threat-oriented’ approach to national defence reads more like an amalgam of all previous models (except, of course, the Treasury-constrained approach).

The universe of threats to the UK (no fewer than 18 of them) is set out in graphic form early in the paper. Several of these are what would be expected in any competent, modern national security threat picture (‘State-based threat’, ‘Violent extremist groups’, ‘Bio-security threats’, ‘Deniable proxies’). Some, however, are simply weapons (‘Novel weapons’, ‘Electro-magnetic railguns’, ‘High-energy weapons’ and ‘Chemical, Biological, Radioactive [*sic* – the usual term is *Radiological*] and Nuclear’) which, very serious concerns though they are, do not, strictly speaking, constitute a threat in their own right. Others are technologies which might be found in the wrong hands, but which might also be used in non-military, non-threatening ways (‘Hyper-sonics’ and ‘Commercially available drones’). Similarly, the illustration shows environments (‘Space’ and ‘Cyber’) which, like everywhere on or around the globe, can be used in both threatening and non-threatening ways. There are circumstances (‘Climate change affecting regional stability’ and ‘Weakened global institutions’) which might or, again, might not be of direct concern to defence. Several of them have no obvious meaning whatsoever (‘Over exposure through globalisation’, ‘Sub-threshold’ and ‘Capability overmatch in certain areas’) and in one case (‘Global security post CV-19’) it could be that the better title for this page has somehow slipped down to join the body of the illustration.

To meet this vast array of changes, challenges and threats UK armed forces will modify their ‘operational approach’, to ‘meet the ambition for Global Britain’ and to ‘protect the UK, its citizens and its interests.’ Everything will have to adapt: ‘We must change how we deter our adversaries, defend our nation and our nation’s interests.’ The armed forces will be modernised and organised to function along a continuum from ‘operating’ to fighting wars (or ‘to warfight’, to use the awful expression that currently masquerades as a verb in some UK defence discussions). In what might be the central, defining idea of the Command Paper, UK armed forces will become more ‘integrated’ than ever before, ‘beyond the traditional concept of ‘joint’ to a depth of multi-domain integration that adds up to far more than the sum of its parts.’

While maintaining the ability to fulfil ‘many of the tasks we have traditionally undertaken’, the armed forces will require no less than ‘new doctrine, new operating methods, new capabilities and new partners’ if they are to ‘deter and constrain’ the country’s adversaries in something described as ‘the grey zone between peace and conflict.’ The doctrine of ‘persistent engagement’ will see the armed forces committed to an ‘increased forward presence’ which will allow them to ‘operate’ against the UK’s adversaries and competitors ‘below the threshold of armed conflict.’ Presumably, in order to have effect throughout the ‘grey zone’, armed forces will also be required to operate *above* this ‘threshold’, suggesting that the metaphorical grey zone will nevertheless have a metaphorical dividing line running through the middle of it. With that in mind, the UK will remain fully committed

to NATO, maintaining ‘well-supported and equipped nuclear and conventional forces at high readiness, across all domains, capable of high-intensity warfighting.’ NATO will also provide the framework for the UK’s efforts in other areas – space and cyberspace, the ‘systemic’ challenge from China, arms control and proliferation, global health crises and technological development. The Indo-Pacific region is ‘critical to our economy, our security and our global ambition to support open societies.’

The paper explains how the four military commands – Strategic Command, Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force – will be reorganised and re-equipped to constitute the ‘Integrated Force 2030’. As suggested earlier in this essay, each of these sub-programmes will doubtless provoke intense debate concerning budgets, organisation, equipment capabilities and platforms. For example, how will Strategic Command (on behalf of the MOD) work with GCHQ in the National Cyber Force? What investment criteria will drive the relationship between Space Command and commercial interests? The ‘more threat focused and more lethal’ Royal Navy will have a global role, doing everything from ‘safeguarding our homeland’ to fisheries protection to ‘upholding our values’. But will the Royal Navy have enough warships, of the right sort, to meet all these demands, and will there be enough men and women to crew them? Will the Army achieve the optimal balance between armoured and light forces? Will it be feasible to deploy a fully equipped division of troops to join allies (i.e., the United States) on operations? By 2025 the Army will reduce to 72,500. Is this reduction too much? Or could the Army be reduced even further by 2030 – perhaps to 60,000? For the Royal Air Force, in addition to the 48 F-35 Lightning aircraft already on order, how many more will be needed, and how many of these will actually be bought? Is the A400M a good replacement for the C130J Hercules? How much investment will be required for the Tempest Future Combat Air System after 2025, and might the case for a collaborative European effort become irrefutable?

## Assessment: UK National Strategy, 2021 to 2030

In this essay I have discussed two UK government documents, each of which contains a considerable amount of information and analysis delivered in a self-confident and upbeat tone. In recent years the West has, arguably, been too willing to allow its adversaries and competitors to take the initiative strategically and economically, and these papers could be welcomed as the first steps towards reclaiming and maintaining some of that lost strategic initiative. What is also to be welcomed and commended is that both documents, together with other core components of the 2021 defence review, particularly the *Defence and Security Industrial Strategy*<sup>4</sup>, and other publications such as *Future Soldier – Transforming the British Army*<sup>5</sup>, have all been published openly and are therefore available for critique. A defining feature of liberal democracy is the stability of the relationship between society, the government and the armed forces, and the willingness to publish documents of this sort is surely evidence of that stability. However, taken together, these two papers cannot be said to meet the standards expected for a complex policy document such as a national strategic and defence review which must communicate its message domestically and internationally, to allies and adversaries alike. Neither document is well structured and in both the language can be opaque, verbose or platitudinous, and the presentation can be sloppy. The arguments can be repetitive, rambling and predictable. As for content, the Integrated Review is a *smorgasbord* of good intentions,

<sup>4</sup> HM Government, *Defence and Security Industrial Strategy: A strategic approach to the UK’s defence and security industrial sectors* (London: HMSO, CP 410, March 2021): [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/971983/Defence\\_and\\_Security\\_Industrial\\_Strategy - FINAL.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/971983/Defence_and_Security_Industrial_Strategy - FINAL.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> British Army, *Future Soldier: Transforming the British Army* (March 2021): <https://www.army.mod.uk/media/11826/20210322-army-future-soldier-publication-final.pdf>

reading like a pre-edited early draft of a national strategy, with everything that *could* be included in such a document listed, lazily, as a *priority*. With respect to *Defence in a Competitive Age*, it is too soon to judge how much of the ‘Integrated Force 2030’ will be achieved in the course of just 9 years. For the present, however, there is at least a faint suspicion that the document presents a ‘theory of change’ for the armed forces that is either masterfully comprehensive or delusionally over-extended and lacking in detail.

Although structure, style and, of course, content are all important in documents of this sort, my concern here is with the habits and precepts that will inform and guide UK defence over the coming decade. I have several questions and misgivings. The first of these concerns the political environment in which the defence review has been shaped. The Conservative government led by Prime Minister Johnson could be criticised for what I would describe as the ‘politics of inspiration’, whereby an ambitious policy is declared, without apparently having thought through its implementation to any great extent. Any doubts and criticism of the policy in question are then deflected in two ways. First, the policy aim is held to be of such unimpeachable virtue that only the most mean-spirited could question it. Who could not want the UK to become the sort of country envisioned in these documents? Or, to put it another way, how could even the most sceptical reader of the Integrated Review disagree with *all* of it? Second, those responsible for the much less interesting and attractive task of actually delivering the policy are routinely described as working ‘incredibly hard’ and doubtless perspiring heavily, preferably somewhere out of view.

It is the ‘politics of inspiration’ that allow the word ‘integrated’ to be used throughout the Integrated Review yet with very little attempt to explain what the word actually means and, most importantly, what additional value it is expected to bring to UK policy and strategy. In military circles the idea of operational integration is well understood and has been attempted over many years under many labels – ‘combined’, ‘joint’, ‘comprehensive’, ‘purple’ etc. But without some explanation as to what it might mean cross-governmentally, ‘integrated’ is a meretricious term (not many would argue for a *disintegrated* policy review). What would cross-government integration involve and produce that has not already been achieved by the ‘Fusion Doctrine’? What would ‘deeper integration across government’ amount to and how much additional power and influence will it generate? Or is it that the relevant functions and policies of government (security, defence, development and foreign) have been ‘integrated’ only to the extent that they have been reviewed in the same document?

A second set of questions concern the level of ambition on display in these documents and specifically the ‘Global Britain’ nostrum. Ambition and purpose are essential at any level and in any field. But so too is realism. In 2019 *The Economist* newspaper noted that ‘life as a medium-sized country in a world of continent-sized rivals is hard.’ The newspaper quoted an unnamed former Foreign Secretary’s view that while Scandinavian countries might use large aid budgets to achieve a disproportionate level of significance around the world, “Nordics are trusted by people in the international community in a way Brits are not.” What is the real political, ethical, economic and strategic purpose of Global Britain and does the UK possess the resources and methods with which to achieve the goals it has set for itself in the Integrated Review? If Global Britain is more than mere rhetoric, perhaps with a tinge of desperation caused by Brexit and by the possible break-up of the United Kingdom, then what precisely should be expected of it and what are the performance indicators? What difference could Global Britain make to the rest of the world, and will the rest of the world welcome it?

Mention of resources introduces my third misgiving – the budget. The proposed defence posture, including the development of Integrated Force 2030, is obviously contingent upon the supply of

public money, considerable sums of which have been allocated and earmarked. The government has undertaken to spend £188 bn on defence over the next four years – an increase in defence spending of 14 per cent. As always, however, policy aspirations and plans must confront the reality of economics – the allocation of limited resources to meet competing demands, some of which might be yet to emerge. In the UK, defence spending is not at present high or excessive in relative terms – something in the region of just two per cent of GDP. But even this small proportion of public expenditure could be challenged by other, ostensibly more pressing claims for spending on public health and welfare, education, transport and so on. The defence budget could remain stable or even increase, but it could just as conceivably decrease. Some might argue that the proposed security and defence bill could be settled from within the UK’s mounting national debt. That might be the case, actuarially, but in reality, the economic arguments are unlikely to disappear – the argument for ‘borrowed’ money will have to be made just as convincingly as that for ‘real’ money.

UK defence-related statements and documents, as in both cases discussed here, often contain a passing reference to Adam Smith, albeit without apparently knowing it. ‘The first duty of the sovereign’, wrote Smith, ‘is that of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies’. This duty ‘can be performed only by means of a military force’ which, Smith spotted, ‘grows gradually more and more expensive’. This led Smith to the following comment – critically important, but not often mentioned: ‘In a civilized society, as the soldiers are maintained altogether by the labour of those who are not soldiers, the number of the former can never exceed what the latter can maintain, over and above maintaining, in a manner suitable to their respective stations, both themselves and the other officers of government, and law, whom they are obliged to maintain.’<sup>6</sup> In other words, even the most well-intentioned, ambitious and well-designed defence plans will, sadly, have to be paid for and will have to compete with other bids on the national wealth. And at a time of national economic difficulty, when there is no obvious existential threat to the UK (at least not by the criteria traditionally used), the case for maintaining (let alone increasing) expenditure on defence could prove difficult to argue intellectually, as well as politically awkward. This either reflects or informs (or both) the lack of public interest in matters of defence and security – as a former UK Secretary of State for Defence reportedly once put it, ‘there are no votes in defence.’ When, in the course of the next decade, public and government are asked to confirm defence budgets and spending plans, I suggest they are more likely to be persuaded by cogent arguments explaining in clear, unambiguous terms what the threats and risks are to the UK and *why* scarce public money should be spent, rather than *how*.

My fourth misgiving concerns the defence review’s emphasis on technology. Perhaps the most striking feature of the 2021 defence review is its understanding of the pace and scope of technological change. Both documents are full of insights: data and information should be regarded as a strategic asset; the collation and analysis of data should be better integrated in a cross-government ‘digital backbone’ with common standards and tools for use in the digital sphere; more thought should be given to ensuring an effective and productive relationship between humans and machines; domestic security and defence enterprises should see themselves as collaborators with government; ‘digital transformation’ should see a reassessment of traditional procurement models such as competitive tendering and contracting; and more effort should be made in public education concerning the risks and opportunities of the digital environment and in training a workforce with the requisite skills and qualifications.

But are there any limits to this enthusiasm for technology and can it cope with asymmetry? It is often

<sup>6</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, A Selected Edition ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 393, 406, 398.

claimed that the world has entered a new ‘digital era’ or is undergoing a new ‘industrial revolution’. Yet these developments, significant though they are, do not explain everything. Throughout history, human beings have become adept at blending continuity with change, the old with the new, the established with the innovative and, today, the analogue with the digital. Humans generally prefer evolution to revolution. In this spirit, does it always follow that an adversary equipped with the most advanced weapons and communications systems can only be deterred or defeated by a response in kind? Technology could, of course, improve the agility, reach and lethality of UK armed forces, but is there a necessary inverse correlation between technological capability and size? Presumably, an army of 100,000, equipped with ‘leading edge’ technology, could be no less agile etc. than an army of 72,500? It is important not to confuse *mass* (a simple measure of the amount of armed force potentially or actually available – the number of soldiers, warships and combat aircraft) with *density* (the degree of concentration in which armed force is deployed). A densely deployed force, whatever its mass, would of course be highly vulnerable, particularly to an adversary equipped with modern surveillance, targeting and attack capabilities. But if a force with a very large mass were to be very widely dispersed and could use communications and information technology to ensure minimal reduction in operational coherence and combat effectiveness, then surely that would be a more sustainable, resilient and flexible outcome? Military mass should be judged on its own terms, by need and effect, and as a multiplier of modern defence technology, rather than as an outmoded alternative to it.

Given the complexity of international security and what the UK has (or plans to have) at stake in Europe and around the world, this might not be the best moment to begin abandoning the ‘analogue’ capability to deploy actual human beings on traditional-style military operations if necessary. It might even be a little foolish. Consider a very large European military power, with a history of predating upon its smaller, militarily weaker neighbours. If the leaders of that country were to read the UK defence review, would they react by moving hurriedly to a higher level of communications and weapons technology? Or might they decide to move in the opposite direction, to call the UK’s and technology’s bluff by establishing ‘off-grid’ divisions of tens of thousands of troops equipped with basic weaponry, moved by railways and commercial vehicles and controlled, not by digital communications but by flags? How would the UK respond, and could it do so in a timely manner?

The defence review’s emphasis on technology also invites reflection upon the ethics and accountability of what is being proposed. Governments enter into a tacit contract with their armed forces to provide what is known as ‘force protection’ – a range of weapons, equipment, doctrines and procedures which should offer protection from danger, injury and death. But this contract is not limitless. In ethical terms at least, risk transfer cannot be total – *force protection* should not be seen as a stepping stone to *force impunity*. The argument here is that the presence of humans on the battlefield has been essential to the centuries-long project to ensure that the resort to, and practice of warfare are constrained on moral grounds. The concern is that if new technology allows for human soldiers to become progressively detached from the process of combat, irreparable damage might be done to the just war tradition which underpins international legal and ethical codes governing the use of armed force. By one view, it is the mutual exposure to risk that is the basis of chivalry as well as morality in war. In other words, there is an ‘ethic of reciprocity’ which, though it may be blurred and intangible, exists nonetheless. It is also widely argued that if remote warfare has the effect of making it more difficult to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants then that is not acceptable ethically.

The question of accountability arises particularly with respect to the intention to turn a substantial portion of the British Army into a raiding force of sorts. Embodying the slogan of ‘permanent and

persistent global engagement’ a new ‘Ranger Regiment’ – a force of four battalions – will become ‘more present and active around the world’. Operating ‘globally on a persistent basis’ from their bases in ‘strategic hubs’, these troops will ‘support and conduct special operations discreetly in risk environments’ and will take on ‘some tasks traditionally done by Special Forces.’ But what does ‘discreet’ mean or imply in this context? Under whose jurisdiction will these operations take place? What level of oversight should the UK Parliament expect before, during and after these operations take place?

My final misgiving concerns the way these documents approach the most awkward problem of all – the future. What passes for a defence and security debate in the UK has often been less an intellectual and practical attempt to understand international security and national strategy in the 21st century, and to respond accordingly, but instead the tired repetition of a set of even more tired assumptions. In general, when assumptions are not exposed to critical scrutiny they have a way of transforming themselves into received wisdom and convenient ‘facts’. This can especially be the case with national strategic and defence reviews. National strategy is neither simple nor easy; largely because it is an attempt to engage with a future that is not merely uncertain, but fundamentally unknowable. Yet it must nevertheless be engaged with – decisions must be made in the present for national strategy to be coherent and effective in the future. It is at this point that some national strategists like to tell themselves that strategy endows its practitioners with the singular skill of peering into the future and finding, when they do, that the future is less unknowable than is supposed and is either, uncannily, rather like the present or, better still, much less expensive to prepare for than previously imagined. There is one variation on the theme, whereby super-empowered national strategists peer into the future and decide that it looks so benign or seems so predictable that nothing need be done at all and no decisions need be taken, such that the country can take a strategic holiday for a decade or so. The UK has made this mistake on one or two occasions in the past.

Unfortunately, the 2021 defence review seems to have fallen foul of the delusion that the future can be mapped. Not long after its publication, while discussing the Integrated Review on BBC Radio 4, the UK Chief of Defence Staff made the following challenge to the interviewer and, presumably, to the programme’s audience: ‘Pray tell me, what threats that are going to emerge during the course of the ten years an army of this size won’t be able to deal with in partnership with our NATO alliance?’<sup>7</sup> A glib answer to this question could be, quite simply, ‘a threat that would require a larger army than the British Army, or a differently equipped one’. The more serious answer to the question, of course, is that it cannot be answered – neither by the Chief of Defence Staff, nor the interviewer, nor the audience. That is the point. Similarly, in his foreword to the *Defence in a Competitive Age* the UK Secretary of State for Defence confidently declares that the ‘mission’ of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces is to ‘seek out and to understand future threats, and to invest in the capabilities to defeat them.’ But how can something that is unknown (i.e., in the future) be sought, and how much investment is such an exercise likely to attract? If it is governed by any one idea in particular, national defence is surely more a matter of insurance than prediction. Defence is concerned with the management of risk and it is disingenuous – at the very least, considering what could be at stake – to suggest that risk can be eliminated. Put another way, at a time of mounting international uncertainty, and with novel and complex interdependencies emerging between threats, hazards and challenges, the very last thing the UK needs is the pretence of certainty. As George Orwell put it in 1946:

<sup>7</sup> BBC Radio 4, *Today*, 23rd March 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000td0c>

The point is that we are all capable of believing things that we know to be untrue and then, when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on the battlefield.

### Conclusion: Incoherent, Under Strength and Over Stretched

The politics of security and defence have never been straightforward and have been markedly less so since the early months of 2020. In these circumstances the design and articulation of national strategy cannot be expected to be a simple undertaking. Yet it is when conditions are at their most volatile and change most intense that a sober, measured, unambiguous, articulate, well-presented and durable national strategy is needed more than ever. The 2021 defence review, however, gives the impression of having been written inside an echo chamber, where the premises of an argument are not recognised as such but as self-evident ‘facts’ which then go unchallenged, and with little apparent interest as to whether the review will be understood by a non-specialist reader. The review should convey a sense of proportionality, in which the UK’s aspirations form a reasonable (rather than exaggerated) link between the country’s resources and capabilities and the state of the world in the early to mid 21st century. And if ‘integration’ is to strengthen that link then a much clearer sense is needed as to the meaning of that idea and the value it can be expected to bring. Is ‘integration’ a strategically significant ‘step change’, or is it simply a different way of doing things in government? If so, are there any limits to integration, any functions of government that should not be integrated? Or is ‘integration’ no more than the title of a document? As things stand, for all the intellectual effort and practical wisdom that must have informed these documents, and for all the effort that must have gone into their drafting, the outcome falls short of expectations. The 2021 defence review is, in short, a bit of a mess. The most that should be said of *Global Britain in a Competitive Age* and *Defence in a Competitive Age* is that these documents constitute work in progress – an early draft of what might in time become a credible and sustainable national strategy and defence posture. If these documents are to remain authoritative to 2025, let alone to 2030, they will require extensive revision, editing and polishing. Otherwise, the 2021 UK defence review will invite criticism in terms that have been heard too often in the past – that the UK’s national strategy is incoherent and the defence posture is both under strength and over stretched.

Cityforum has been contributing to public policy debate since 1990. The organisation comprises a small, trusted, independent group of experienced individuals, respected for their intellectual honesty, knowledge and extensive contacts spanning the private, public and not-for-profit sectors at all levels. In addition, it works closely with a large network of associates, providing depth, breadth and genuine expertise and practical experience. They include a former Cabinet Minister, a retired Member of the Episcopal Bench, public service officials, military, police, intelligence and security specialists, senior medical figures and business executives, academics, journalists and publishers. They contribute in London and elsewhere to Cityforum events and to the studies we undertake, including interviewing at all levels in organisations and sectors of interest.

From its inception working with the Bank of England on the Basel Accords; with the Reserve Bank of South Africa on the transition from apartheid; hosting and planning with the Scottish Government the Adam Smith Bicentenary; Cityforum has been active in an increasing number of areas that now include collaborations in security, policing, crime and justice, emergency services, critical national infrastructure, cyber, privacy, health and social care, transport, financial services, regulation and energy.

It researches and publishes reports and develops and hosts events in the UK and, where invited, around the world. As part of its bespoke advisory and strategic guidance service the organisation also acts as a ‘candid friend’ to senior public-sector executives, and undertakes studies and reviews, providing sound impartial advice and specialist judgement to assist in meeting the enormous challenges faced by the public service today.

With over 25 years shaping strategic thinking, building understanding and adding value within and between diverse groups, the organisation has a proven track record. Its highly regarded round table discussions and smaller conclaves are well known both for bringing together an enviable mix of decision makers and practitioners and for stimulating new thinking in response to some of the most difficult contemporary public policy challenges.

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