

## The Russo-Ukrainian War and the UK Integrated Review

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3 March 2022



## About the Author

Paul Cornish is an independent author and policy consultant and Visiting Professor at LSE IDEAS, the foreign policy think tank at the London School of Economics. He served in the British Army and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and has worked at Chatham House, the UK Defence Academy, King's College London, the RAND Corporation, the Universities of Cambridge, Bath and Exeter and the Australian National University. His work covers national strategy, international security futures, cyber security, arms control, the ethics of conflict, and civil-military relations. He has participated in several UK government-sponsored research projects and became a member of the UK Chief of Defence Staff's Strategic Advisory Panel in 2009. His advisory and analysis work takes him around the world and he is an established commentator on international security. His most recent book, co-written with Kingsley Donaldson, is *2020: World of War*, published by Hodder & Stoughton in July 2017. He is editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Cyber Security*, published in 2021. Paul is also Chief Strategist at Cityforum Public Policy Analysis Ltd and director of his own consultancy company, Coracle Analysis Ltd.

At the time of writing, with a considerable Russian armoured column parked in the outskirts of Kyiv, it is clear that the invasion of Ukraine is far from over and that its most shocking consequences are yet to be seen. Russian attacks on urban areas will see deliberate destruction on a massive scale and will add vastly to already growing casualty numbers – among military forces on both sides and, appallingly, among Ukrainian civilians.

In the midst of this worsening crisis, it is hard to see how and when it will end. But it will end, eventually, somehow. As Russia's dead and injured are returned to their homes, perhaps popular resentment at the dictator Putin's aggression, and the shame it has brought on Russia, will become politically decisive. Stripped of much of their wealth, perhaps Russia's oligarchs will round on the *capo di tutti capi* and remove him. Perhaps Russian conscripts deployed in Ukraine will 'refuse to soldier' and desert to the Ukrainian army. An armistice or treaty of some sort might allow Putin to withdraw his forces, while claiming to have achieved enough of his mission (if he has one). Perhaps Russia will withdraw in disgrace, unable to declare victory for as long as Ukraine refuses to acknowledge defeat. Or perhaps Putin and his generals will be offered up for war crimes prosecution at The Hague. Of all conceivable outcomes, the most unlikely is that Ukraine will give up, accept defeat and allow itself to become a tributary state of Tsar Vladimir's new Russian empire.

### European response gathers pace

Whenever, and by whatever means, stability and peace return to Ukraine, it will be critically important that the rest of Europe does what it must to ensure that travesties of this sort are prevented in future. The structural disarmament of western Europe in the decades following the Cold War has doubtless contributed, if only circumstantially, to Putin's unrestrained brutality. Ukraine tells us that the time has come for Europe to reacquire its strategic sense, and the capabilities that should go with it.

There are strong and encouraging signs that some European governments have read the runes and are beginning to respond appropriately. Europe-wide economic, cultural and travel sanctions will bite into Russia in many ways and on many levels. Even neutral Switzerland has agreed to join the European Union-led sanctions regime. Many European countries, large and small, will supply Ukraine with defensive weapons and other military equipment. Even the European Union, known to prefer talking about military matters rather than doing very much, came close to supplying Ukraine with combat aircraft. In a change of direction that should reshape the European security and defence debate for a generation, Germany announced a €100 bn modernisation of its armed forces and pledged to increase defence spending to the NATO target of 2 per cent of annual economic output. And whatever lingering doubts there might have been about NATO's coherence and capability, the ageing Alliance has undoubtedly been revitalised by the Ukraine emergency. NATO's strategic communications have not been so unequivocal for many years, and several European governments are queuing up to join.

### Is UK history repeating itself?

When the dust begins to settle, what position will be taken by the United Kingdom – a global economy, a nuclear power, a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, a prominent cyber power and a founding member of NATO, with decades of military commitment to European defence?

Historically, it is at moments such as these that the structural short-sightedness of the UK's strategic leadership becomes painfully clear. As if some sort of self-healing strategic polymer were at work, the UK has a habit of declaring the end of a crisis, peering into the murky future and seeing nothing alarming on the horizon, and then announcing a strategic holiday. In August 1919 Prime Minister Lloyd George's government adopted the 'Ten Year No War Rule' as a rationale for reductions in military spending after the First World War. In 1928, it became a 'rolling rule', whereby the decade-long strategic holiday would simply begin again each year. The rule was abandoned in 1932 and rearmament began – belatedly, in terms both of lost deterrent credibility and weakened defence capability. After 1945 the memory of the rolling rule error was vivid. The post-1945 defence planners knew they could not revert to the rule and so, in 1947, they produced a cunning variation upon the theme; the 'Five Plus Five' rule whereby major war was not considered likely for the first five years, with the risk increasing gradually over the following five. The rule was dropped by the Attlee government in 1948 because of deepening insecurity in Europe. Forty years later we were at it again. In 1990, seduced by a so-called 'peace dividend' following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the UK's 'Options for Change' defence review offered a post-Cold War strategic holiday, albeit in more cautious terms than in the past.

## **Brexit vision and our future defences**

While it would be stretching the point somewhat to describe the UK's membership of the EU as a strategic crisis, it is nevertheless fair to say that for its advocates, Brexit was seen as something of a strategic liberation, to be celebrated with yet another strategic holiday. Delayed by Covid, the holiday was announced in March 2021, in the form of a review of national strategy and defence – the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR).

In the post-Brexit, epoch-marking spirit of the moment, Prime Minister Johnson argued in his foreword to the IR that 'Having left the European Union, the UK has started a new chapter in our history.' National strategy and defence would be part of this new vision, in the form of 'the biggest programme of investment in defence since the end of the Cold War'; an investment that will 'demonstrate to our allies, in Europe and beyond, that they can always count on the UK when it really matters.' At the heart of this historic reorientation of the UK – or, rather, of 'Global Britain' – would be a strategic 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific: 'In the decade ahead, the UK will deepen our engagement in the Indo-Pacific.' The 'Indo-Pacific tilt' would not amount to the complete strategic abandonment of Europe – far from it. The IR was open-eyed about Russia, described as 'the most acute threat' in the Euro-Atlantic region and to the UK. Readers were reassured that the UK 'will actively deter and defend against the full spectrum of threats emanating from Russia', that the UK's commitment to European security will remain 'unequivocal' and that the UK will be 'the greatest single European contributor to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area to 2030.'

## **An unconvincing review**

Yet in the IR's breezy reframing of the post-Brexit moment as Global Britain's Year Zero there is indeed more than a hint of strategic liberation, and even of escape: 'A defence of the status quo is no longer sufficient for the decade ahead.' Thus, Brexit is much more than the welcome conclusion to something old and dull – it is an exciting beginning, a 'unique opportunity' to 'exploit the freedom that comes with increased independence'. Freed from the EU the UK can maintain

‘existing friendships’ and can remain the ‘leading European ally within NATO’, but it can also look ‘further afield’ to become ‘the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific.’ Global Britain’s interest in the Indo-Pacific region will not, however, be merely economic, political and diplomatic, it will also be a ‘tilt’ in geostrategic and military terms. Global Britain will have a new and important strategic defence mission: ‘The significant impact of China’s military modernisation and growing international assertiveness within the Indo-Pacific region and beyond will pose an increasing risk to UK interests.’ It was in the name of this new mission that an allied Carrier Strike Group centred upon *HMS Queen Elizabeth*, one of the UK’s two new aircraft carriers, was despatched on a tour of the Indo-Pacific region between May and December 2021. And in the same vein, the UK’s participation in the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) submarine procurement programme was announced in September 2021.

What the IR says, effectively, is that the UK national strategy can look, Janus-like, both to its European past and to a new, Indo-Pacific future. But what the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022 has shown is that Europe is by no means as stable as the authors of the Integrated Review might have hoped. The UK thus finds itself in the unenviable position of being committed to not one, but two strategically risky regions of the world. And with a small and top-heavy Royal Navy, a shrinking Royal Air Force and a British Army reducing to 72,500 by 2025, with not much heavy armour and too little battlefield mobility, the UK is militarily under-equipped to manage either, let alone both.

The IR was never convincing as a coherent and considered public document of national strategy.<sup>1</sup> In light of events in Ukraine it has become a parody of itself. While the authors of the IR might have felt that ‘defence of the status quo’ in Europe had become old hat, the war between Russia and Ukraine has shown the status quo to be extremely vulnerable and its defence to be vitally necessary. European governments and institutions are already reacting to this shift. Although not a military power, and unlikely to become one, the European Union has demonstrated its central importance in European security and stability. The revitalised NATO can expect increased defence spending across the Alliance. And ‘defence’ will be the key word here: increased spending on military units, equipment and weaponry should be presented not as ‘rearmament’ but as rebalancing, filling the yawning gaps in NATO’s post-Cold War defensive capability. And in the spirit of *détente* NATO should invite Russia to join treaty negotiations on new force levels, equipment, deployments and transparency in Europe.

## Realism and balance in UK defence

And the United Kingdom? It has become embarrassingly, painfully clear that the March 2021 Integrated Review is not fit for purpose. The IR should be scrapped immediately and a new, more realistic national strategy should be prepared as a matter of urgency. The strategic ‘tilt’ to the Indo-Pacific region should be down-graded to no more than an ‘optional extra’. The new strategy should instead concentrate on the UK’s more urgent strategic and defence responsibilities and interests in Europe, making clear that it is concerned less with exploiting new opportunities than with insuring against an increasingly uncertain and uncomfortable future in its own geostrategic area. The UK should increase its defence spending to three per cent of annual economic output, setting an example by exceeding the NATO target. It is often argued that the UK should maintain ‘balance’ among the three main branches of its armed forces. But ‘balance’ is meaningless out of context and without a central purpose. That purpose should now be clear – the UK should abandon its global maritime pretensions and return to the continental strategy it had for much of the twentieth century. To enable this ‘tilt to Europe’ the increased defence budget should be devoted to rebuilding the British Army and the Royal Air Force, rebalancing UK national strategy around

<sup>1</sup> Paul Cornish. *Incoherent, Under Strength, Over Stretched: the UK National Strategy and Defence Review 2021* (London: Cityforum, April 2021). <https://www.cityforum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-UK-National-Strategy-and-Defence-Review-2021-Final.pdf>

Europe and enabling the UK to make a tangible contribution to conventional deterrence on land. Balance should also be sought between 'analogue' conventional armed force and emerging 'digital' means of warfare. Ukraine shows that military mass is still needed in all three domains of warfare – land, air and sea. Digital means should augment and multiply that mass but should not – or, at least, not yet – be considered an effective substitute for it. Rebalanced as a capable, convincing and above all continental strategic power the UK should work closely with France, Germany and other allies to renew and reinforce the European pillar of NATO.

Among the criticisms that could be made of the 2021 Integrated Review, perhaps the most cutting is that it was not the outcome of careful strategic judgement but was the product of two influences: a Prime Minister in search of a catchy, post-Brexit brand name ('Global Britain'); and two very large warships (HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Prince of Wales*) in search of a strategy. The time has now come, surely, for a rather more considered approach to a rather serious function of government. The much-derided 1990 'Options for Change' defence review contained at least one nugget of wisdom that might usefully be borne in mind as 'Integrated Review 2.0' gets underway: 'Defence arrangements... cannot sensibly be made the leading agent of political change, the instrument through which Western nations express their best hopes and happiest aspirations. It makes no sense accordingly to throw away safeguards simply because we would like not to need them anymore.'



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