The UK Integrated Review Refresh 2023

*Everything Everywhere All at Once*

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About the Author

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\(^{1}\) I am grateful to several colleagues for their comments on earlier versions of this essay. Any errors of fact or judgement remain my own.
In March 2023 the UK Government published a revision of its 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR2021), a document described at the time as the UK’s ‘overarching national security and international strategy’. Taking a particular interest in the implications for UK defence policy and the capability of UK armed forces, this essay offers a review of the review of the review – a comment on the Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world (known as IR2023 or, appallingly for anyone who actually speaks English, simply as ‘Refresh’).

Having come to terms with its vogueish misuse of a verb as a noun, the first question prompted by the full title of IR 2023 is to ask what it might mean to be ‘refreshed’? One vivid image of refreshment is the closing scene in the 1958 film *Ice Cold in Alex*, set during the Western Desert campaign of World War II. Having survived a march across the desert, dealing with minefields, treachery and attacks by the Afrika Corps, Captain Anson, the lead character played by John Mills, enters a bar in Alexandria and orders an ‘ice cold’ glass of beer. Anson gazes in awe at the condensation running down the glass and then proceeds to drink the beer in one go. That must have been refreshing – particularly after the half dozen takes that the director reportedly insisted upon.

How could a dry and, perhaps, soon to be dusty document such as a national strategy review be made refreshing? On first impression IR2023 seems to make a good go of it: it is only about half the length of its turgid and verbose predecessor; it is more organised (perhaps to a fault) and less repetitive; and the various Johnsonian vacuismsthat characterised IR2021 – ‘Global Britain’, ‘science and technology superpower’, ‘soft power superpower’ – have all been ditched. IR2023 contains slightly fewer whole page images intended to illustrate something or other, but still far too many. IR2021 had six of these things, including a tourist’s snapshot of the UN Headquarters in New York and a photograph of a very large iceberg. IR2023 has five: some people in Nepal apparently assembling a solar powered internet hub; British soldiers (all six of them) on exercise in Estonia waiting to board Britain’s Chinook helicopter; a tidal turbine off Orkney; what seems to be a quantum computer microchip; and a wreath on the door of 10 Downing Street. What is the purpose of these images, other than to conform to some infantile marketing or ‘strategic communications’ template? Who in UK government decides on the inclusion of these images, and why? What do they provide that a sentence or two of written English cannot? There are some egregious examples of near-unintelligible twaddle (“Ukraine has highlighted the importance of drawing upon multiple areas of competitive edge to compete both asymmetrically and simultaneously across domains”) suggesting that some sections of IR2023 might have been written by ChatGPT. Thankfully, however, most of the document demonstrates that UK government can, when it tries, express itself in reasonably clear English – and without the need for photographic accompaniment.

Beyond these presentational quibbles the more important question to ask of IR2023 is whether, as a document of national strategy, it makes strategic sense? At its most basic, strategy could be said to be a matter of preparing to meet an uncertain future by co-ordinating (or, indeed, ‘integrating’) capabilities and methods. But strategy is, of course, much more than simply an awareness that

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5 ‘Vacuism’ is used here incorrectly but imaginatively to mean a word or form of words that, on close inspection or in the light of experience, is found to be largely devoid of meaning.

6 The grandiloquent expression ‘Global Britain’ is used in IR2023 but only once and, tellingly, only in reference to the title of its 2021 predecessor.
the future is uncertain or the development of a bureaucratic process. Strategy must be guided by a general purpose of some sort; a set of desired outcomes; an idea of what and where to be (and how to remain there) once the future makes itself known. Here we come to the first serious difficulty with IR2023. While the absence of ‘Global Britain’ is to be welcomed, it is noticeable that it has not been replaced by any other ostensibly unifying, overarching slogan. That might arguably be a good thing – perhaps the time has come for a return to the practice of describing a national strategy simply as a ‘National Strategy’. But it might also suggest that alternative, more accurate descriptions of the UK as a post-Brexit, mid-ranking European economy contributing around three per cent of global GDP and with declining hard power might have been considered too controversial politically, inviting hot-headed accusations of ‘declinism’ and such like. And so we come to possibly the most worrying aspect of the title of IR2023 – its sub-title. ‘Responding to a more contested and volatile world’ might be an attempt to avoid controversy by making ‘the vision thing’ implicit: i.e., to claim that the UK knows well enough what it is and where it wants to be, and so just needs to deal with impediments to its ambitions. But it might also be indicative of a shift away from real strategic thinking altogether: ‘response’, as scholarly types like to say, is a necessary component of strategy but it can never be a sufficient explanation of it, largely because to wait until response is necessary could be to cede strategic initiative to adversaries and events.

British military education teaches that strategy is not just about having ambition and purpose (‘ends’), it is also a matter of having the methods (‘ways’) to achieve those strategic outcomes and of ensuring that resources (‘means’) are available to do so. These three components of strategy must be kept in balance: if training and resources are inappropriate or insufficient to meet the strategic purpose then either the purpose should be modified or training altered and/or resources increased. Surprisingly, or perhaps revealingly, this tried and tested formula appears only once in IR2023, and in truncated form. The UK’s ‘updated’ strategic framework, the authors explain, is to have four pillars that, between them, will ‘set the ways through which the UK will pursue these ends.’ [IR2023, p.16] But means are not mentioned – an unsettling hint of strategic illiteracy. IR2023 contains a good deal of apparently strategic ideas and language, but the difficult task of constructing a coherent and durable national strategy is not made easier when the central ideas and terms of strategy are allowed simply to orbit emptily and lazily around each other or are even ignored altogether.

A second difficulty concerns ‘integration’ – the trademark claim of IR2023 and its predecessor. As with IR2021 it is not immediately obvious what the authors had in mind with their use of this term and, therefore, whether they can have achieved their aim. As observed in a critique of IR2021, ‘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).’ That criticism applies still more to IR2023, a document which refers approvingly to a list of no fewer than 22 ‘sub-strategies’ covering everything from online media literacy to quantum technology to border security to telecommunications and semi-conductors. It could be that the number of sub-strategies is an accurate reflection of the complexity that the UK must confront in its encounters with a ‘more contested and volatile world’. But where and what is the ‘integration’ of which the UK government speaks so evangelically, and what value does it add? Or, as was asked of IR2021, ‘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?’ As it stands, the document reads more like a vade mecum for government speechwriters, spokesmen and media

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7 Cornish, Incoherent, Under Strength, Over Stretched, p.12.
8 Ibid.
liaison officers, with ‘lines to take’ for any awkward questions that might arise in Parliamentary Questions, such as those that might be prompted by the forthcoming Defence Command Paper. Or perhaps IR2023 is a pre-manifesto of some sort, with the only significant ‘strategy’ motivating this document being a successful outcome in the forthcoming general election.

*Integrated Review Refresh* also prompts the question whether ‘strategic’ is a word now so over-used within UK government as to have lost much of its meaning as the relationship between ends, ways and means, and to have become rather stale. Are these 22 ‘sub-strategies’ nothing more than what might otherwise have been labelled ‘public policy areas’, with IR2023 being simply a consolidated summary of those policies? Unless, of course, the pandemic of strategies is deliberate – a cunning example of *maskirovka* on the part of UK government? Those with a more traditional understanding of strategy (from the Greek *strategos* for ‘military general’, after all) might argue that its main concern should be with international security and its primary purpose to ensure that a polity can protect itself from external threats, secure its interests and so forth. The revised Defence Command Paper (DCP – one of the 22 sub-strategies⁹) is to be published later this summer. Anticipating the criticism that the DCP, when it emerges, will reveal that in some areas of armed force and hard power UK national strategy has become weak and incoherent, the authors of IR2023 will be able to point out, in high indignation, that the UK cannot be accused of having lost interest in strategy because it has *lots* of strategy – 21 more lots, to be precise.

Whether or not the concept of strategy has become diluted – inadvertently or otherwise – it remains the case that the security and defence components of any national strategy must be concerned primarily with challenges and threats to national territory and interests and to those of allies. IR2023 offers a clear enough description of the two main sources of security challenges and threats to the UK: Russia and China. Russia’s decades-long track record of aggression in Europe, its ‘threats to the UK homeland’ and its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine are nothing less than ‘assaults on European security’. The strategic significance of the war in Ukraine is not under-estimated: ‘What has changed is that our collective security now is intrinsically linked to the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine. We must also analyse, learn from and adapt to the changing nature of warfare – notably in the land domain’ [emphasis added]. It might reasonably be inferred from this language that IR2023’s authors see Russia as a large-scale, long-running and even structural security challenge to Europe and the UK: a challenge of such significance that the UK will be required to adapt its strategic goals, methods and capabilities over time. Yet, most confusingly, in the same document Russia is described as ‘the acute’ (and on one occasion ‘the *most* acute’) threat to the UK.

In what they describe, somewhat pretentiously, as a ‘key methodological change’ (which amounts to borrowing a methodology that has for very long been very well established in medicine), the authors define ‘acute’ (correctly) as ‘generally time-bound, discrete events, such as major flooding’ and its opposite, ‘chronic’ (also defined correctly) as ‘enduring challenges that gradually erode elements of our economy, society, way of life and/or national security...’ [p.46] But who can seriously and sincerely consider Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to be a singular, discrete and short-lived challenge to European (and UK) security? Who does not see some connection between all the conflicts in which the Russian Federation has been involved for the past three decades and, in particular, between aggression and crimes in Chechnya (1999), London (Litvinenko: Polonium, poisoning 2006), Estonia (‘Web War I’: 2007), Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014, 2022) and Salisbury (Skripal: Novichok poisoning, 2018)?

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It can only be a very rushed analysis that could allow the authors of IR2023 to suggest, on the one hand that the crisis in Ukraine is a structural and long-term challenge to European and UK security but on the other hand to insist, bizarrely, that the problem can nevertheless be classified as acute and then to be satisfied with a series of short-term responses: in Ukraine, ‘technology, digital and information warfare have helped to hold back Russia’; the threat posed by Russia to European security is ‘the most pressing national security policy priority in the short-to-medium term’; and the UK’s objective should be to ‘contain’ Russia. [pp.10-11, emphasis added]. As it stands, where Russia is concerned, IR2023 offers an extraordinary mismatch of diagnosis and treatment, making it possible to draw attention to the ‘notable’ difficulties in the ‘land domain’, mentioned above, but then to offer absolutely no solutions to those difficulties. Perhaps, having incorrectly labelled the war as an ‘acute’ problem, the authors of IR2023 are bound, for the sake of consistency, to believe that the war will have resolved itself before much longer, and ideally before Christmas. Or could it be that it is only by insisting that the conflict in Ukraine is a temporary problem that a case can be made for making a long term effort elsewhere?

Had the authors of IR2023 read their manual of medical jargon more closely they would have come across a term that precisely describes the problem of Russian aggression in Ukraine. ‘Acute-on-chronic’ is used to refer to a long-term disease (or, for our purposes, a strategic challenge) that manifests in temporary but very dangerous and painful episodes (or crises, or wars). But simply because the episode or flare-up passes, or because the war can be expected to come to some sort of a conclusion at some point in the future, does not mean that the underlying causes and explanations of the challenge are any less chronic.

IR2023 leaves the reader with nothing like a clear and coherent idea as to the UK’s long-term strategic objectives in its dealings with Russia. What is the strategic outcome towards which the UK is working with respect to Putin’s Russia: Contain? Defeat? Deter? Negotiate? Or some unspecified amalgamation of all these? Similar questions are prompted by the document’s treatment of China, described as being ‘willing to use all the levers of state power to achieve a dominant role in global affairs’, as having taken a ‘more aggressive stance’ and ‘threatening to create a world defined by danger, disorder and division’. China, IR2023’s readers are informed, is nothing less than an ‘epoch-defining challenge’, a ‘systemic challenge’ and ‘a challenge to Euro-Atlantic security and an open and stable international order.’ The charge-sheet against China is alarming and is only made more so by the assertion that China is ‘deepening its partnership with Russia.’ [pp. 2,3,8,20,42]

Despite the gravity of these charges, the UK’s response is confused. At an early stage in IR2023 its authors promise to ‘update the UK’s approach to China to keep pace with the evolving and epoch-defining challenge it poses to the international order’. [p.12] This is a very strange choice of words – if China poses a challenge that really is epochal, can it ever be sufficient merely to ‘keep pace’ with it? But the document then changes tack and proceeds more assertively to promise to ‘increase our national security protections in those areas where [China’s] actions pose a threat to our people, prosperity and security’ and to work more closely with ‘core allies’ and partners to present China with a more united front. AUKUS – the Australia-UK-US submarine contract – and the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), a partnership between Italy, Japan and the UK would presumably be examples of that collaborative effort. AUKUS and GCAP exemplify a shift in UK national strategy: ‘we will put our approach to the Indo-Pacific on a long-term strategic footing, making the region a permanent

10 A critique of the AUKUS arrangement can found in Paul Cornish, AUKUS and ‘Global Britain’: Sub-standard Strategy? (London: Cityforum, September 2021). A more recent assessment by Australian analysts suggests that the submarines ‘might soon be so easily detected they could become billion-dollar coffins’: Roger Bradbury, Anne-Marie Grisogono, Elizabeth Williams and Scott Vella, ‘Progress in detection tech could render submarines useless by the 2050s. What does it mean for the AUKUS pact?’, The Conversation, 14 March 2023.
pillar of the UK’s international policy.’ [p.22] (By comparison, it should again be noted that Russia’s
invasion of Ukraine and the consequent destabilisation of Europe is considered in IR2023 to be
no more than a short-term strategic problem). Yet a more emollient tone is adopted later in the
document when IR2023 insists that all is not lost in Sino-UK relations: the UK will ‘engage directly
with China, bilaterally and in international fora to preserve and create space for open, constructive,
predictable and stable relations that reflect China’s importance in world affairs’; ‘Ultimately, the UK
seeks to re-establish a stable, constructive and frank relationship [with China] that can both create
better conditions for cooperation and underpin the kind of strategic dialogue required to prevent
miscalculation and misunderstanding.’ [pp.31, 43] Given that UK exports to China amount to c.£32
billion annually, and imports from China c.£72 billion, a slightly sceptical reader might be left with
the suspicion that where China is concerned, the UK can be less assertive than it likes to promise,
while needing China a little more than it is prepared to admit.11

It is not only the identification of strategic threats – the starting point of any competent national
strategy – that is treated haphazardly in IR2023. Deterrence and defence are core components of
the management of strategic threats, yet both are treated in a slipshod manner. In his foreword to
IR2023 Prime Minister Rishi Sunak notes that ‘we recognise the growing importance of deterrence
and defence to keep the British people safe and our alliances strong.’ The faint suggestion that
deterrence and defence (and the inseparable relationship between them) might be another
innovation, recently discovered in 10 Downing Street, could surprise (or alarm) those who assume
that these ideas and practices must always have been central to UK national strategy. The authors
of IR2023 do deserve credit for supplementing their theory of deterrence and defence with
resilience, but to claim that this combination ‘forms a new operating model for national security’
[p.45] stretches credulity somewhat – resilience has long and widely been understood to be a form
of deterrence by denial.12 And what must also be said of resilience is that it is not the same thing as
response and that it must be paid ahead in the form of deployable force structures, recruitment and
training, and technological, industrial and logistic capacity that is governed more by the doctrine of
‘just in case’ than by that of ‘just in time’ or ‘just enough’.13

But there is worse to come. Later in IR2023 its authors note ‘We will … continue to develop our
broader deterrence and defence toolkit, including information operations and offensive cyber tools,
and make greater use of open source information alongside our intelligence capabilities.’ [p.12]
Although there will doubtless be more to be said of the ‘defence toolkit’ when a ‘refreshed’ Defence
Command Paper appears later this year, there is the beginning of a suggestion here that even while
a land war is raging in Europe, British land-based hard power is out of fashion, perhaps because it is
not ‘broad’ enough. In any case, adjustments to the defence budget made in IR2023 (an additional
£5bn over the next two years) and in the Spring Budget Statement (an additional £6bn over the five
years to 2028) will give the Ministry of Defence little or no spending flexibility with which to address
equipment and other shortfalls in the British Army and the UK conventional defence posture more
widely. Of the IR2023 £5bn, £1.9bn will be spent on increasing ammunition stockpiles (run-down by
supplies sent to Ukraine) and on improving the UK’s munitions infrastructure, with £3bn committed
to ‘modernisation of the nuclear enterprise’ (including investment in the next phase of the AUKUS
project). In whatever manner the Spring Budget’s additional £6bn is to be spent, it is inconceivable
that it will redress the deficiencies in what the UK Secretary of State for Defence has described as
Britain’s ‘hollowed out’ conventional armed forces.

11 In comparison, UK exports to the European Union amount to c.£330 bn annually, and imports to c.£403 billion annually.
13 I am grateful to a colleague for this observation.
What is not acknowledged in IR2023 is that the approach to deterrence and defence offered by its predecessor, IR2021 (‘we will actively deter and defend against the full spectrum of threats emanating from Russia’\(^\text{14}\)) manifestly failed in February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. As Jeremy Blackham has observed, ‘in February 2022 deterrence palpably failed. It cannot be proven but is at least arguable that a more visible, credible and united NATO political and conventional military front might have given Russia pause.’\(^\text{15}\)

It has to be said, of course, that Russia did not invade the United Kingdom and that Ukraine is not a member of NATO, enjoying the security of its Article 5 mutual defence commitment. Nevertheless, if the UK is sincere in its warnings about Russia’s ‘assaults on European security’ (and Ukraine is, after all, a European country), and if the Russian threat is more accurately described as ‘acute-on-chronic’ rather than merely ‘acute’, then surely the UK should by now be planning a much more substantial and exemplary contribution to the deterrence of future Russian aggression in Europe, in the form of at least one fully equipped, fully trained and fully deployable armoured division with all necessary airpower and logistics support. Instead, IR2023 envisions the continuation of small tactical deployments up to battlegroup size around northern Europe, with the watery ambition that ‘we could scale up to a brigade if needed in a crisis.’ [p.40]

In amongst these modest and tentative planning assumptions there is barely any comment on the need for reserves: an omission that demonstrates an alarming lack of interest in the practical matters of maintaining a military posture that can make an effective and sustainable contribution to deterrence and defence. Mention is made, for example, of the UK commitment to hold one battalion ‘at readiness in the UK as the pan-Balkans strategic reserve’ [p.39] for NATO’s KFOR mission. But there appears to be no deeper awareness that the battalion will require its own tactical reserve, limiting the tactical coverage of the battalion, and that the British Army might need to earmark another reserve battalion should the first be deployed. The need for reserves applies in all armed services, Royal Navy, British Army and Royal Air Force, if deployments, at whatever level – tactical, operational and strategic – are to be sustainable. Reserve forces make it possible for a force posture to be reinforced, replaced or regenerated and, above all, to be sustained.\(^\text{16}\) A force posture is much more than the current distribution of British warships, battalions and aircraft, shown proudly on a map of the world. Real strategic strength is determined, as much as anything, by the availability of reserves. At different levels of training and readiness from fully trained, professional servicemen and women on short notice to move, through to part-trained reservists fully deployable only after further training, it is reserves that can ensure strategic sustainability. And without sustainability deterrence, defence and resilience mean not very much at all. If the vital matter of reserves does not deserve a place in a document that purports to be deeply concerned with deterrence, defence and resilience, then the UK’s ‘strategic sense’ might well have vanished altogether.

A final observation concerns the relationship between Russia and China and the UK’s response to it. If the government of the UK is as concerned as it claims to be about the ‘deepening partnership’ between China and Russia then a strong argument could be made for the UK to weaken that partnership in the place and in the manner best suited to it. By using its geographic position in Europe to its advantage, and by using its limited hard power resources as efficiently as possible, the UK could demonstrate to the world and, not least, to China, that Russian aggression can be defeated and that the Beijing-Moscow axis is not invincible.

\(^\text{14}\) IR2021, p.61.
\(^\text{16}\) I am grateful to a colleague for this observation.
This essay began with two questions, the second of which was to ask whether IR2023 makes strategic sense? In spite of claims to the contrary, it does not – to the point that it is difficult to be sure what the point of IR2023 might actually be. Its authors should certainly be congratulated for having abandoned its predecessor’s ludicrous claims for ‘Global Britain’ and for various forms of ‘superpower’ Britain. But, with no regret for the passing of this childish rhetoric, there is now a gaping hole where a more reasoned strategic outlook ought to be found, prompting questions as to the UK government’s understanding of, and capacity for strategic planning and decision-making. Given that IR2023 claims a strategic interest for the UK not just in the Euro-Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific but also in a ‘wider neighbourhood’ embracing the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Antarctica and the Arctic, perhaps the only conclusion to be drawn is that the UK’s strategic vision, to the extent that it has such a thing, is to be, to borrow the title of another well-known film, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

Jeremy Blackham asks whether the UK has ‘the political vision, honesty and courage to make a realistic strategic choice, construct a credible deterrent framework and match our military and industrial resources with a stable budget sufficient to implement the choice we make?’ IR2023 suggests not. At its worst, the document is a painfully embarrassing reminder of the UK’s inability and disinclination to deal with an ‘acute-on-chronic’ strategic challenge on its doorstep, in the form of cross-border aggression and high-intensity armoured warfare in Europe, and its inclination instead to make spurious, self-serving arguments for looking elsewhere. It is hard to see how the UK can claim to be a strategically-minded power, located just 25 miles off Europe, and not be committed to the long-term project to rebuild and maintain what has been described as Continuous On Land Deterrence (COLD) in its own continent – a task in which the UK has decades of experience and in which it can claim a high level of authority and leadership. Instead, as too often in the past, the UK hopes to slip away unnoticed on a strategic holiday (in somewhere warm like the Pacific), leaving behind empty rhetoric and token gestures towards European security and stability.

The first question – whether IR2023 is refreshing – is best answered by describing a little known alternative ending to *Ice Cold in Alex*. In this version of the film just two exhausted survivors, namely the UK Secretary of State for Defence and the Chief of the General Staff, arrive in the Ministry of Defence bar after an exhausting long march from 10 Downing Street. Beer is ordered and an ice cold glass, dripping in condensation, is duly placed in front of each man. But that’s as far as refreshment goes because the bar is out of beer.

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17 For the sake of balance, I should note that David Frost writes that ‘It is, in fact, on foreign policy that Britain has most successfully marked out a different route after Brexit’ and describes IR2023 as ‘a rare intellectually coherent document coming out of Government’: ‘Remainers are convinced that Britain is irrelevant. They’re set to be humiliated’, *Daily Telegraph*, 31 March 2023.