

# Defence Committee of the House of Commons

## Written Submission on

### US, UK and NATO

Submitted by Rethinking Security

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#### About Rethinking Security

Rethinking Security is a network of UK-based organisations, academics and campaigners with expertise in peacebuilding, conflict and security research, disarmament and demilitarisation.<sup>1</sup> We have a shared concern that the current approach to national security in the UK and beyond often hampers efforts for peace, justice and ecological sustainability. We are committed to building a much richer understanding of what security really means, and of what is required to build sustainable security. For further information, please see [www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk](http://www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk).

#### 1. Executive Summary

**1.1** This evidence submission seeks to address the question of how, where and why NATO member states, including the United States and the UK, perceive threats to themselves and the different understandings of national interests that this represents. It focuses on four of the questions posed by the Committee in its Call for Evidence:

- How far should the UK ensure its foreign policy, defence and security priorities are aligned with those of its NATO Allies, in particular the US?
- What are the new US Administration's priorities for US foreign, defence and security policy? What impact will they have on the US Global Posture Review and, in turn, how could that affect UK and NATO policy and deployment decisions?
- Where do the US, UK and NATO align on their understanding of global threats and their view of how to respond? Where do they diverge?
- Will NATO's newfound interest in the Indo-Pacific complement the UK's 'tilt'? If so, what should the UK be doing bilaterally with partners and where in NATO should it focus its efforts?

**1.2** The main conclusions of this submission are that:

- NATO has got used to a quite static conception of its utility within Europe as a counter to Russia. It needs to look beyond this to a transformational role in reducing tensions and moving Europe to a safer, more cooperative system.

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<sup>1</sup> Rethinking Security's organisational affiliates include Campaign Against Arms Trade, Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament, Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, Conciliation Resources, Forces Watch, International Alert, Medact, Movement for the Abolition of War, Oxford Research Group, Peace Direct, Quaker Peace And Social Witness, Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network, Saferworld, Scientists for Global Responsibility, United Nations Association – UK, and War on Want.

- Political turbulence in the United States and the steady rise of illiberal democracies within Europe should remind NATO that it has much work to do in realising the values and principles that it claims to uphold internationally, including the rule of law.
- It is crucial to recognise just how exceptional the United States and UK's global approach to defining their national interests (and thus threats to them) is and that this is a political choice not an obligation bequeathed by history or geography.
- NATO has no mandated role in the 'Indo-Pacific' under its Charter. It should assume that any increase in its military presence and alliances in the region will be perceived by regional states in similar terms to a comparable increase in their presence and alliances in the North Atlantic.

## **2. UK alignment with shifting NATO and US priorities**

- 2.1** The United States is shifting its international priorities and posture under the Biden administration in a manner that is broadly consistent with the directions pursued by the previous two administrations. While Biden has a very different political and diplomatic style to Donald Trump, he shares a preoccupation with containing the rise of China and with disengaging US forces from the post-9/11 wars in western Asia. Despite an apparently favourable opinion of NATO and Europe, he continues a long-term shift in US priorities away from Europe and confrontation with Russia.
- 2.2** Biden is already nearly a year into what he has promised will be a single term of office. US politics is volatile and there is the plausible prospect in 2025 of a return to an abrasive, populist-nationalist presidency averse to Europe and multilateral alliances. This could constitute a more abrupt and radical challenge to NATO. This might not necessarily be true of the bilateral relationship between the United States and the UK, which may have to make an overdue choice between continuity of alliance (with the US) and its avowed values and principles. This needs to be understood as an actual choice, not a foregone conclusion based on the path dependence of post-1941 relations. Being able to act on this choice will depend on strategic planning that reflects the costs as well as the benefits of the US alliance. There was little indication during the Trump administration that the UK had made such an evaluation.
- 2.3** With the United States prioritising China and the 'Indo-Pacific', there is an additional choice to be made in terms of the geographic direction of the UK and, to lesser extent, NATO. While the latter has made partnerships in Asia and talked up its involvement in the region, it is constrained by its geographic mandate under the North Atlantic Charter to the defence of Europe, North America and the ocean between. Moreover, NATO's experience of out-of-area 'crisis response' operations in Afghanistan since 2002 has been a catastrophic failure. Most European member states probably would not support a revision and extension of its geographic mandate.
- 2.4** Regardless, the UK has set a course under the Integrated Review for an increased presence – diplomatic, trade, military – in the 'Indo-Pacific' that is very much in line with the United States' longer-term 'pivot' to Asia. This follows much more from a perception that there are opportunities for trade and influence for 'Global Britain' in this region rather than the United States' perception of a growing threat to its interests in the region. Whereas the United States appears to be shifting its posture from Europe and the Middle East towards Asia, according to the Integrated Review the UK has will increase its commitments to all three regions, which does not seem credible within its more limited resources.

- 2.5** NATO itself faces some difficult and necessary choices in this context and after three decades of strategic stretch and drift. This period has been characterised by steady expansion of membership across most of Central and Eastern Europe, the expansion of operations and occupations into the Western Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia), Central Asia (ISAF in Afghanistan) and North Africa (Libya), and the deterioration and collapse in détente with Russia. Out of area operations have been disastrous for all sides and confrontation with Russia has exacerbated the armed division of Europe and fears of a hugely destructive, potentially nuclear conflict.
- 2.6** As with the NATO operation in Afghanistan, the alliance itself requires a strategic objective or end point and an exit strategy for once it gets there if it is to be judged a success. The 1990s was a wasted opportunity to move on from the Cold War, to build trust and normalise security relations with the Russian Federation. Much of NATO, not least the United States and UK, seems relatively comfortable with the return to the familiar armed division of Europe. Indeed, for some influential constituencies the heightened tensions present an economic and political opportunity. Yet this is a dangerous and costly status quo. The alliance should therefore be working towards the resolution of its conflicts with Moscow and a transition to a more cooperative, far less militarised European system. The potential for a significant, and perhaps sudden, reduction of US engagement with European security in the medium term should focus minds on the importance of such a change objective, as should the fragmentation of threat perceptions within NATO.
- 2.7** The deterioration of democratic practice within the United States over recent years also ought to serve as a wake-up call about the values and principles on which it claims to be based: “individual liberty, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law” (Brussels Summit Communiqué, 14 June 2021). While NATO can rightly point to the lack of respect for such values in Russia and China, this ought to also be a major concern within many member states, including the United States, Turkey, Hungary, Poland and increasingly the UK, as well as in the illiberal actions and interventions of some of them in non-Western states such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Somalia.

### **3. Convergence and divergence of UK, US and NATO threat perceptions and responses**

- 3.1** It is important to step back from the idea and language of threats and collective defence on which NATO was founded 72 years ago and which kept it focused throughout the Cold War to where the expanding alliance situates itself in the 2020s and beyond.
- 3.2** Unlike in 1949, when all looked east towards the Soviet Union, the ‘ordinary’ (i.e. non-nuclear-armed) members of the alliance today tend to see threats in different directions. For some in the Nordic states and Central Europe, Russia has simply replaced the USSR as their threatening neighbour. For Canada and Denmark/Greenland there is a vaguer sense of threat from their more accessible polar regions. For Southern European members, the prospect of extremist violence in and conflict-induced migration from northern Africa and western Asia is of concern. For Turkey, bordering Syria and Iraq, this perception is extremely acute and has precipitated direct military interventions. For Greece, it remains Turkey that is of paramount concern. Thus, there is considerable fragmentation of threat perception within NATO not only in types of threat but in their severity, ranging from existential in the Baltic States to, at worst, concerning in Canada and Portugal.

- 3.3** For the United States, as a North American superpower, the situation is quite different. On the one hand, its territory is not seriously threatened directly by any state, notwithstanding its nuclear stand-offs with Russia and North Korea. On the other, it has a vast, dispersed global presence that makes it feel vulnerable, particularly given the increasing proximity of its military deployments to such potential adversaries as Iran, China and North Korea. The threat it feels is largely to its status as the primary global power rather than to its people's security, wellbeing or prosperity.
- 3.4** As former global powers struggling to adjust to life as nuclear-armed middle powers, the situation is rather different again for the UK and France. They share greater direct threat perceptions about Europe's insecurity relative to Russia and northern Africa than the US does. But they also retain extensive networks of colonies or overseas territories in the Atlantic/Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans and share with the US a sense that areas far beyond the Euro-Atlantic space are vital to their national interests.
- 3.5** For most NATO states, then, threat perceptions are essentially local or proximate and relate to their real national experiences of warfare, occupation, oppression or insurgency over the last century. Their responses are similarly regionally focused and their opportunities relatively constrained by modest resources or (in the case of Germany, Canada and Italy) a settled perception of themselves as regional or middle powers.
- 3.6** For the United States, the threat is everywhere and opportunity is very limited because its status can only be diminished from the global hegemonic role it has assumed for the last three decades. Like the UK in the 1940s-1960s, its choice is essentially what to hold on to amidst a general withdrawal from an overstretched global presence.
- 3.7** For the UK, France and increasingly Turkey too, there is a different balance of perceived threat and opportunity that conditions them to an increasingly competitive global role. Like Russia, these three NATO former Great Powers aspire to reassert their global influence. For France the principal opportunity lies in consolidating its position at the heart of a more unified and 'sovereign' EU defence capability with significant interests in Africa and the Middle East. For Turkey the opportunity is an industrialised reassertion of its leading role among Muslim states in the Eastern Mediterranean and further into Asia and Africa.
- 3.8** The UK has comparable ambitions to France and Turkey in rebuilding a global role for itself but with two important, linked distinctions. First, whereas France and Turkey aspire to global influence via the consolidation of their position as dominant regional powers, the post-Brexit UK ('Global Britain') aspires more overtly to global influence with a particular focus on the very distant 'Indo-Pacific'. Second, whereas French and Turkish ambitions tend to be overtly linked to increasing their autonomy from their post-WW2 patron, the United States, the UK's strategic ambition, as set out in the Integrated Review, is very much conjoined with America and the threats that Washington perceives, not so much to its own security as to its own status.
- 3.9** Distinguishing between proximate, severe or even existential threat perceptions and more attenuated threat perceptions that are bound up with ideas of status and competitive opportunity is important because it demonstrates how differently NATO member states understand their national interests. For most NATO states this drives a relatively focused defence policy. For the UK, France and the United States the quest for recognition of their global status drives a potentially very unfocused and costly approach that is divorced from

conventional ideas of defending their own territory and people. It is important to recognise just how exceptional this approach is – our study of 20 European and North American security strategies found it only in the three countries – and that it is a political choice not an obligation.

#### **4. The UK, NATO and the ‘Indo-Pacific’**

**4.1** Despite the activism of its current Secretary-General in the region, NATO has no mandated role in the ‘Indo-Pacific’. Article 6 of the North Atlantic Charter (as modified in 1951 and 1962) specifies that its mutual defence obligations apply only to an attack:

- on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America on the territory of Turkey or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer;
- on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties, when in or over these territories or any other area in Europe in which occupation forces of any of the Parties were stationed on the date when the Treaty entered into force or the Mediterranean Sea or the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.

It thus applies no more to US or French colonies or territories in the Pacific (including Hawaii) than it did to UK territories in the South Atlantic in 1982. Its invocation in respect of Afghanistan in 2001 related to an attack in North America.

**4.2** ‘Tilting’ militarily to Asia is a sovereign decision of the UK, as it is to other extra-regional countries (or, indeed, the EU) with nascent ‘Indo-Pacific strategies’ and there is an important international right to navigate international waters freely. However, it must be assumed that any increase in military presence and alliances in the region will be perceived by regional states in similar terms to a comparable increase in their presence and alliances in the North Atlantic. In the cases of the UK, France, the Netherlands and the United States in particular, such a presence will further be viewed locally – and not least in China – through the historical prism of colonial occupation and unequal treaties.

*This submission was written for Rethinking Security by Richard Reeve, its Coordinator.*