

## **Written evidence submitted by Wyn Rees and Peter Magill, University of Nottingham (TIP0011)**

*(Wyn Rees is Professor of International Security at the University of Nottingham and Peter Magill is completing a PhD on Anglo-French Security Relations in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham)*

### **Introduction**

1. The 'Tilt to the Indo-Pacific' in British foreign and security policy has been driven by three factors. First, an acknowledgement that this region is, and will remain, the most dynamic in the world. It involves the fastest growth in transnational trade and it involves powers, such as China and India, that have become key actors in global economic, political and environmental developments. It is one of the areas of the world with the greatest risk of inter-state conflict, with numerous flashpoints – such as Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands - that have the potential to become significant conflagrations. Second, it reflects a post-Brexit desire by the current Conservative government to assert 'Global Britain', the determination to be an influential power on the world stage. With the Indo-Pacific garnering attention, the UK is determined to be an actor of importance and influence there. Third, with the US having 'pivoted' towards Asia since 2011, the UK desires to be engaged in such a way as to re-energise and sustain its security relationship with Washington. In the aftermath of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, the UK sees the Indo-Pacific as a means to be closely aligned with its most important ally.

2. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR), was an attempt to give a defence expression to these ambitions. Unlike many former defence reviews the IR stands out as an attempt to integrate defence and security policy with British foreign policy. It signalled an important reset with a corresponding change to the missions of the armed forces. Two themes were at its heart and shaped its implications. The first is that competition between Great Powers was the foremost consideration on the international agenda, with China and Russia at the top of the table of threats. The second theme is that the manner in which threats manifest themselves has become increasingly complex and multidimensional. The UK faces threats that occur across a spectrum of domains, largely below the threshold of armed conflict but with the potential to cross that threshold and escalate to the use of military force.

### **The Euro-Atlantic Area versus the Indo-Pacific**

3. During the Cold War the West faced a challenge from just one pole of power, the Soviet Union. Today the challenge emanates from two very different regions and manifests in different ways. Russian military capabilities deteriorated throughout the 1990s, but since 2007, Moscow has invested heavily in the modernisation of both its conventional and nuclear forces. Russia is now the most 'acute direct threat to the UK' (IR: 26) due to the conventional forces that are arrayed against NATO members. Some of these forces have obtained combat experience in the post-2014 intervention in the Ukraine, as well as the subsequent Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict. Russia has the capability to project power from its territory and it possesses the most potent nuclear capabilities of any Western adversary. However, Russia's 'Achilles heel' is two-fold. First, it possesses

a modest economy, that is poor at delivering quality consumer goods, and has inadequate and ageing infrastructure. It is highly dependent on energy exports, especially natural gas. Second, it suffers from a population that is dwindling in size and insufficiently productive. These two factors circumscribe the threat that it can present to the UK and the West and explain why the Integrated Review sees the Russian threat as secondary.

4. China presents a much more complex challenge for the UK: it is simultaneously a competitor, a rival and a collaborator. China is economically much more powerful than Russia, it is technologically agile and possesses a huge internal market that makes it resistant to economic pressures. China's status as an economic superpower means that the UK must trade and interact with it. The IR describes China as '...the biggest state-based threat to the UK's economic security' (IR: 62). China's rapid economic growth has not been accompanied by the anticipated political liberalisation and instead it has moved decisively towards authoritarianism and centralised Communist Party control under President Xi Jinping. Its policies towards Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Uighurs and its stealing of intellectual property has alarmed the West.

5. In military terms, China has been increasing its defence spending by up to 10% per year. It has overhauled its rambling armed forces into a much more potent force, equipped with technologically advanced weaponry and a growing nuclear arsenal. The number of surface vessels in its navy has caught up with and surpassed that of the United States, although its blue water projection capabilities are only just emerging. China has taken steps to build military capabilities that would make it extremely costly for the US to intervene in a cross-strait conflict between China and Taiwan. It is possible to foresee a time when an American President would be deterred from intervening against a Chinese effort to reintegrate Taiwan into the motherland.

6. China has also mirrored Russia in challenging the West in ways below the threshold of the use of force. Whilst it has refrained from conducting actual physical attacks, Beijing has authorised cyber operations that have caused damage to firms and the national infrastructure. China has targeted companies to steal commercial secrets, disrupted computer networks and conducted hacking operations. It has also been willing to sanction goods from neighbouring countries and it has undertaken targeted campaigns against citizens in other countries that are critical of its policies. The IR recognises that a security response to China must be multifaceted in nature and must comprise efforts across the spectrum of conflict, from cyber to the potential use of military force.

### **Mobilising Allies**

7. The UK desires to play a growing role in the Indo-Pacific. It is aware of the fact that its distance from the region and the finite resources at its disposal means that it can be most effective when it is cooperating closely with allies. In the Indo-Pacific patterns of security cooperation are less well developed than among states in the Euro-Atlantic area and therefore there is an opportunity for the UK to cultivate bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation. The UK can use its diplomatic muscle and experience to facilitate cooperation. It can also draw upon its 'soft power' through its established relationships in the region to help to bring countries together.

8. The UK has configured its 'tilt' towards the Indo-Pacific region around its relationships with four key countries; the US, Australia, Japan and India. At the heart of its strategy has been the desire to remain the foremost ally of the US and its 'partner of choice' in international security. With the Trump and Biden administrations taking a confrontational stance towards Beijing, the UK has believed that it must demonstrate its value to Washington in this context, consistent with its stated

objective to be the European country ‘..with the most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific’ (IR: 6). The UK is constrained by its limited military footprint in the region, as well as its need to consider its heavy commitment to NATO. The IR acknowledges this balance and there is a sense in which the UK commitment to the Euro-Atlantic region is seen as a way of freeing-up the US from some of its obligations in Europe.

9. One of the principal ways the UK has sought to demonstrate its value to the US has been through the deployment, since May 2021, of a carrier strike group to the Pacific. It has been based around HMS Queen Elizabeth with a complement of US Marine Corps F-35B jets on board in addition to UK aircraft. The strike group has benefited from the presence of a US destroyer. This naval force has been a tangible example of the maritime contribution that can be made available by the UK based on the long-standing links between the Royal Navy and the US Navy. In addition, a UK Littoral Response Group, based on Batch Two River Class patrol vessels, will be based in the region. The challenge for the Royal Navy will be to demonstrate a substantive and enduring, rather than just a symbolic, capability.

10. As regards Australia, the UK took a major strategic step in announcing in September 2021 that it would be party to a new defence pact: the Australia, UK and US agreement (AUKUS). This pact was self-evidently an attempt to enhance a pattern of cooperation in order to contain the growing maritime threat from China. Australia was entering into a partnership with the US and UK to build nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines – either US Virginia class or UK Astute vessels. This will give Australia a greater capability than could be provided by conventional submarines, in terms of endurance, speed and range. It will enable Australia to conduct offensive operations against Chinese shipping in times of war, as well as surveillance capabilities in times of peace. One disappointing feature of the deal was that it abrogated a contract Australia had already signed with France to build 12 diesel-electric submarines. It is to be regretted that the UK and US chose not to forewarn the French government that such a deal was in the offing and it caused considerable resentment in the Macron government. France is already a valuable actor in the Indo-Pacific region and this snub will render it harder to work with France in the future. The UK should compensate for the US tendency to overlook the sensitivities of allies by alerting Washington to situations where allied sensitivities could be disregarded.

11. The two other countries central to the UK’s strategy are Japan and India. Part of America’s reconfiguration in the theatre has been based on an assessment that both India and Japan are willing to harden their stance towards China. Japan has signalled its willingness and the UK has sought to exploit this potential. The UK has signed a post-Brexit trade deal with Japan and is enhancing military cooperation with its Self-Defence Forces. The new Japanese Prime Minister has made it clear that he intends to substantially increase Japan’s defence spending in light of the threats that his country faces. Japan offers fertile ground for improved cooperation, military-industrial collaboration and military exercises. The confluence of interests between the two countries is significant.

12. In the case of India, one of the D10 democratic countries, the UK is building on its historical links with the Indian government. India was concerned by the recent border clashes it experienced with China and has been looking for allies to help it offset the rising military strength of Beijing. Ironically, the UK may find that its enhanced relationship with Australia may have decreased its opportunities in relation to India. France is increasing its efforts to be the European power with the closest linkages to the Modi government in Delhi. The UK should make every effort in future to pursue collaborative programmes that build multilateral cooperation amongst countries with interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

## **Conclusion**

13. The UK has committed itself to play a growing role in the Indo-Pacific theatre and has begun to sketch out roles for its armed services. In an age of perpetual competition, deterring various forms of hostile activity, from cyber conflict to military aggression, and at long distances from UK shores, will be a complex task. The way to achieve this is to work with allies in the region to help to construct security architecture that will deter a rising China from using its muscle against its neighbours. The UK has the diplomatic experience and the reputation to succeed in this endeavour. At the same time, the British government must remain realistic about the limited military power it can contribute to the area and recognise that security there rests primarily with the countries of the Pacific rim.

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