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A Global Influencer? Global Britain and the Integrated Review

By Magnus Smidak

After officially leaving the last of the EU's structures in December 2020, the UK is now finally able to put its 'Global Britain' agenda into practice. Since the slogan was coined there has been much debate on what Global Britain is supposed to mean for the direction of the country. Is it a conscious pivot away from Europe in favour of renewing ties to former colonies like Australia and New Zealand, a so-called Empire 2.0? What will that mean for security, trade and British influence in the world? The UK government hopes to answer these questions with the publication of its Integrated Review: Global Britain in a Competitive Age.

Background

The decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union was an important watershed moment for the UK's role in global politics. It was also a complete accident. The referendum was called in the expectation that it would settle the UK's status inside the EU once and for all. There was never a plan should the referendum be lost. Now that it has happened what direction should the country take? During the referendum campaign the cheerleaders of Brexit offered few concrete proposals about Britain's place in the world outside the EU, other than the country would soar once 'unshackled' from EU regulations and reclaim its past greatness. Questions about Britain's future were left deliberately vague - Brexit meant whatever you wanted it to mean. The first attempts to formulate some kind of guiding principle emerged only after the referendum. In Theresa May's first major speech as Prime Minister to the Conservative Party Conference in 2016 she used the term 'Global Britain' to outline a post-Brexit vision of Britain that was both broad and ambitious. However, it lacked many concrete details which were only later developed in piecemeal fashion in ministerial speeches and parliamentary debates. Global Britain has since been adopted as a totem for the UK Governments' foreign policy stance after Brexit. What it lacks in substance, it makes up in vision - a more global strategic outlook which looks far beyond the continent of Europe. It is also intended as a rebuke to critics who contend that Brexit Britain is turning its back on internationalism and pulling up the drawbridge against the world. The only thing lacking was a coherent idea of what it actually means in practice.

In February 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson launched what was described as the deepest review of British foreign, defence and security policy since the end of the Cold War. The so-called Integrated Review would be government-wide, looking at the 'totality of opportunities and challenges' the UK faces taking into account defence, diplomacy, trade and aid. In the same month Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab outlined the Government's vision of a 'truly global Britain' as having three pillars: to continue to be allies, partners and friends with its European neighbours; to champion free and open trade; and to be an even stronger force for good in the world. While none of these pillars represent a departure from traditional British foreign policy, the Integrated Review is intended to expand upon these themes and outline how it plans to put them into practice. After repeated delays due to the COVID pandemic, the government finally published the Integrated Review on 16 March under the title: [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#).

Indo-Pacific 'tilt'

The key policy announcement in the Review is a post-Brexit 'tilt' towards the Indo-Pacific region. This has been interpreted by some observers as a return to the UK's 'East of Suez' role when it maintained extensive military facilities in the region before retrenching in the 1960s and joining the European Economic Community in 1973. The report signals a change of direction from the UK's traditional policy of preserving the post-Cold War 'rules based international system'. It identifies a more fragmented international order characterised by 'intensifying competition between states over interests, norms and values', and that 'a defence of the status quo is no longer sufficient for the decade'. Central to this is the emergence of China and the Indo-Pacific region as the new geostrategic centre of gravity which the report highlights as already critical to Britain's economy and security. Regarding China it performs a delicate balancing act. On the one hand it states that China is the biggest driver for growth and represents opportunities for bilateral trade and investment, but on the other China is cited as the biggest threat to the UK's economic security with a different set of values and authoritarian government.

In an attempt to square the circle, the UK intends to use its newfound post-Brexit sovereignty to deepen engagement with allies across the region. This strategy includes closer relations with existing institutions such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and strengthening defence and security co-operation – for example by dispatching the UK's newest aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth to the region to demonstrate its interoperability with US jets and ability to project power in support of maritime security. Most important is the application to join the [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership \(CPTPP\)](#). Although it seems somewhat odd for a state in the middle of the North Atlantic with no Pacific coast to join a free trade bloc located on the Pacific rim, there is nothing preventing the UK from joining as long as all the other members agree. Since the UK voluntarily excluded itself from the EU Single Market and Customs Union there is a strong impetus to join alternative trading blocs to make up for the economic losses. The economic benefits of joining CPTPP are unlikely to be very significant, however. Of the 11 members, the UK already has free trade agreements (FTAs) with seven, which it had previously enjoyed as an EU member and were subsequently rolled over after Brexit. The UK is likely to conclude FTAs with two more members (Australia and New Zealand) before joining the CPTPP. This means that the net economic benefit of the CPTPP is free trade with the two remaining members the UK does not have an FTA with: Malaysia and Brunei. None of which can realistically replace the trade sacrificed with the EU. Nevertheless, it is hoped the value of membership will come from strengthening the UK's place in the Indo-Pacific region by putting it at the centre of a network of like-minded states.

EU Co-operation

The 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific was not as pronounced as many observers were expecting. The review strongly reaffirms the UK's commitment to European security and NATO, and states that 'the precondition for Global Britain is the safety of our citizens at home and the security of the Euro-Atlantic region, where the bulk of the UK's security focus will remain.' It is a source of consternation that foreign security and defence cooperation is not part of the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement signed in December 2020 (although it was in the political declaration). The EU is hardly mentioned at all in the Review, and it offers little in the way of

concrete proposals for cooperation post-Brexit. This is unfortunate as the Review identifies Russia as the most acute threat to collective security, more so than China. It states the UK will 'work with NATO Allies to ensure a united Western response, combining military, intelligence and diplomatic efforts.' Perhaps reflecting Global Britain's renewed sense of sovereignty, cooperation with the EU is more restrained: 'we will cooperate with the EU on matters of security and defence as independent partners, where this is in our interest.' This at least leaves the door open for future cooperation. It is clear that the UK will prefer to work bilaterally and sees advantages in carving out a more nimble and distinct foreign policy path, (being the first country to impose sanctions on Belarus in response to election fraud before the EU and US was considered a post-Brexit success.) Lacking a formal EU-UK framework, cooperation will have to take place in looser ad-hoc frameworks such as the E3 group (UK, France and Germany), which is coordinating diplomacy on Iran. It can be a useful format on the occasions where interests do align and affords the UK a leadership role. After all, there are advantages to be gained by coordinating foreign policy in order to maximise impact. Germany warrants only a brief mention in the report, which is described as an 'essential ally'. The UK will seek to strengthen bilateral relationships, particularly on issues such as climate change and through the Joint Declaration on Foreign Policy which it hopes to sign in 2021.

Nuclear re-armament

In an unexpected move, it was announced that the cap on the number of nuclear warheads will be lifted by more than 40% from 180 to 260. The report stated that 'a minimum, credible, independent nuclear deterrent, assigned to the defence of NATO, remains essential in order to guarantee our security and that of our allies.' It is unclear how the addition of 80 nuclear warheads to NATO's already formidable nuclear arsenal (the United States has an estimated 3800 warheads) contributes to international peace and security, and the report does not provide a strategic rationale other than some states are increasing and diversifying their nuclear arsenals. The move reverses 30 years of disarmament since the end of the Cold War. As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) the UK has committed itself to nuclear arms control. The decision could undermine trust in the treaty and hamper diplomatic efforts by the E3 group to hold Iran to its commitments to limit its own nuclear programme. One possible reason for lifting the cap is to encourage the United States to accelerate the development of a replacement Trident warhead. The UK is heavily dependent on US technology for its nuclear deterrent and its aging Trident nuclear submarine fleet is due to be replaced in the next decade.

A global influencer?

As the Integrated Review states, the UK is a European country with global interests. There are clear aspirations to take on (or rather maintain) a global influencing role. The document outlines an ambitious recipe for Global Britain which is activist in defending democracy and human rights; tackles conflict and insecurity; champions free trade and multilateral cooperation; and helps shape the international order of the future. This strategy sidesteps the view that the world is coalescing around powerful regional blocs in the Cold-War mould, and that middle powers (such as the UK) will gain geopolitical influence in this multipolar arena, acting in concert when necessary for mutual benefit. It predicts a worldwide contest over the rules and norms linked to trade and technology and growing maritime tensions over key shipping lanes primarily in the Asia-Pacific region. The UK does indeed have many assets at its disposal which would place it as a top tier middle power influencer. It has a permanent seat

on the UN Security Council, an extensive overseas network and diplomatic footprint, memberships of international bodies and major convening power. Its armed forces are well respected and the City of London is a major hub for world finance to name but a few of its advantages. Nevertheless, ambitions will be tempered by competing and sometimes contradictory demands.

'Soft' power as a channel for British culture and values has been particularly successful, and is certainly less expensive than 'hard' power to help maintain the UK's influence around the world. According to the Review, the UK is a 'soft power superpower' of which contribution to international development is a major component. However, in a move to save money due to the COVID pandemic the government announced a highly controversial cut to the overseas development budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of national income. This will result in billions cut from the conflict-ridden parts of the world that the Review says Britain should help. To assuage the critics, there was a last-minute addition to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Foreword in the Review where the government recommitted itself to returning to 0.7% at an unspecified future date when the fiscal situation allows. This sends the message that international development is not a too high priority for Global Britain's soft power strategy.

The UK intends to remain a leading military actor that is willing to confront serious security challenges. The reduction in development assistance was swiftly followed by the announcement of a four-year £16.5bn surge in defence spending. The Review marks a shift away from conventional capabilities and focusses attention on cyber and space where the conflicts of the future will take place. The extra funding will be spent on a National Cyber Force of computer hackers, and a new Space Command to launch and protect orbiting satellites. Although this has been welcomed by military experts, there is concern that the armed forces are simultaneously being degraded which risks creating tensions with the UK's closest allies. Troop numbers are expected to be reduced from a notional force of 82,000 to about 72,000. A recent [House of Commons Defence Committee](#) report also found that the British Army's armoured fighting vehicle fleet faced 'mass obsolescence' and was deficient in important capabilities such as artillery and air defence. It concluded that the Army currently lacks sufficient armoured capability to make an 'effective contribution' to NATO deterrence. By prioritising nuclear, cyber and space at the expense of conventional forces, and reallocating resources to the Indo-Pacific when threats to Europe's eastern and southern flank are ongoing, it could paradoxically make the UK a less reliable partner to the United States and NATO, and less able to react in an emergency.

Respecting the rule of law and international law runs like a thread through the Integrated Review. As part of its 'force for good' agenda, Global Britain aims to 'promote effective and transparent governance, robust democratic institutions and the rule of law.' It will lead by example and encourage others to observe international law. However, the UK government has been accused of attempting to breach international law not once, but twice in six months in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol that was signed alongside the Withdrawal Agreement. In the first instance, the government admitted that the clauses in its Internal Market Bill that threatened to override sections of the Protocol would break international law in a 'very specific and limited way'. These clauses were later removed following an outcry. Then in March this year the government unilaterally delayed the implementation of parts of the Protocol by extending the grace period for checks on goods entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain, triggering infringement proceedings by the EU. The UK insists it wants to make the Protocol work, nevertheless incidents like these send out a different message about Global Britain when it comes to treaty obligations it considers inconvenient.

Ultimately Global Britain is about how the country can maintain its influence in a world dominated by three giant competing power centres - the US, EU and China. For decades the UK sought to amplify its voice through membership of institutional bodies like the EU. But the UK no longer feels its interests are best served by pooling its sovereignty with others. It remains to be seen whether it can maintain and grow its influence with looser ad-hoc coalitions instead.

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