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From “Global Britain” to Realpolitik – the Updated Integrated Review

How the United Kingdom wants to position itself as a reliable partner in a competitive global order

Nicolai von Ondarza and Dominik Rehbaum

Almost two years after the publication of the “Integrated Review”, the British government has updated its security strategy. This “refresh” is primarily intended to adapt to the rapidly advancing development towards a contested and fragmented global order. Without indicating a radical shift, the strategy specifies the British response to China and Russia and places a special focus on the role of partners as well as on national resilience. Following the leadership change in the British government to Rishi Sunak, the paper sets out a more pragmatic approach for future cooperation with the European Union (EU). In order to advance the implementation of the Integrated Review and strengthen Euro-Atlantic relations, Germany and the EU should seize the momentum and deepen their cooperation with London.

On 16 March 2021, the British government published its vision for the United Kingdom’s role in the world for the coming decade. The so-called Integrated Review (IR21) combined the previously separate areas of international development, national security, and foreign and defence policy into one strategy. It was flanked by the Defence Command Paper, which specified the contribution of the defence sector to the British security strategy. There are two main reasons why the British government undertook an update after such a short time and in the same parliamentary term.

Firstly, disruptive global events – most notably Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, China’s increasingly aggressive

posturing in the South China Sea and the Strait of Taiwan, and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic – have both accelerated and exacerbated the trends already identified in 2021. Secondly, even though not explicitly mentioned in the document, of equal importance are the domestic political changes in the United Kingdom: Since Brexit, there has not been a full legislative term in Westminster. Instead, there have been two early elections and the resignations of four prime ministers. The refresh of the IR is an expression of how the government of Sunak sees the United Kingdom’s place in the world.

The IR21 was dominated by Brexit and Boris Johnson’s vision of a “Global Britain”.



Most notably, it completely ignored the EU as a partner. In contrast, short-term Prime Minister Liz Truss had initially envisaged revising the paper with the aim of taking a harder stance towards China. Under the more pragmatic Sunak, however, the update (IR23) largely refrains from making boisterous statements about a world-leading “Global Britain”. Instead, the new British government paints a more sober picture of a United Kingdom that, together with its partners in the West, has come under pressure and must face much stronger geo-strategic competition.

Following the claim of an “integrated approach”, the IR23 is intended to bring all government policy under a common strategic guideline. To achieve this, the review of the IR21 was led directly by the Prime Minister’s Office, allowing the government to complete it in a relatively short period of time. Primarily, the Cabinet Office relied on input from the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, as well as assessments from the Joint Intelligence Committee and external experts.

Repositioning the United Kingdom in a more contested and volatile world

The IR23 responds primarily to intensified global competition and emphasises the role of international partners in a competitive and conflict-ridden geostrategic environment. In doing so, the British government no longer states the goal of defending the international rules-based order, but rather of co-shaping what it sees as unstoppable change in the international system according to British interests. This still includes the long-term aim of the establishment of an open and rules-based international system based on competition and cooperation between sovereign states. Above all, the United Kingdom perceives itself to be in competition with Russia and China.

Russia as a direct threat

The IR21 had already identified Russia as the most acute state threat to UK security. The IR23 reinforces this by ranking Russia as the greatest nuclear and conventional military threat to security in Europe. A significant part of the IR23 deals with UK support for Ukraine in defending its sovereignty against Russian aggression, with the clear aim of denying Russia any strategic benefit from its invasion. This means that the IR23 establishes a direct link between the collective security of Britain and Europe on the one hand, and the outcome of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine on the other.

Even before the IR23, London had positioned itself as a staunch supporter of Ukraine on this basis. Under Johnson, the United Kingdom had supplied weapons to Kyiv and trained Ukrainian forces even before Russia’s invasion in February 2022. As of March 2023, the country is the largest donor of military aid to Ukraine after the United States, supporting Kyiv with intelligence and training Ukrainian soldiers on a large scale. This support is endorsed across party lines, which has ensured continuity at the top of the last two governments. In consequence, the decision to supply tanks to Ukraine, which the British government took before all other Western allies in January 2023, was uncontroversial domestically. With this, London has thus presented itself – despite Brexit – as a reliable security partner for Northern, Central and Eastern European states in geographical proximity to Russia, both within the framework of NATO and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and bilaterally.

China as an “epoch-defining challenge”

Domestically, the British positioning towards China is more controversial. Whereas London still wanted to achieve “a golden age” of British-Chinese relations at the beginning of the 2010s, the British government has gradually adopted a more confrontational

stance towards China over the last five years — also in line with the United States. Even as some influential Conservative Party MPs call for Britain to take an even more hawkish stance against China, Britain's relationship with the country remains characterised by both dependency and competition. However, unlike his predecessor Truss, Sunak takes a pragmatic approach to China. Consequently, China is classified as an “epoch-defining challenge” and systemic competitor, but not as an acute threat. The United Kingdom recognises the need to become more resilient itself and continues to walk the tightrope between protecting national security and safeguarding its economic prosperity.

On the one hand, the United Kingdom wants to engage directly with China bilaterally and in international fora to create space for open and constructive relations. On the other hand, London sees a danger in the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to build a China-centred international order based on coercive practices that undermine individual rights and freedoms. Against this background, the British government wants to better protect the country's national security and prosperity, as China is perceived to pose a threat to both. To this end, the entire government is to acquire knowledge about — and skills for — dealing with China; the resources for this are to be doubled. This approach is supported by other immediate measures, such as the establishment of a National Protective Agency and new economic security measures.

In a notable difference to the IR21, which largely excluded the Taiwan question, the update reaffirms that the United Kingdom is committed to a peaceful resolution in response to China's increasingly aggressive behaviour vis-à-vis Taiwan. However, a key issue remains the extent to which the United Kingdom can assert its security interests against a more confrontational and power-conscious China.

It should further be noted that the Sunak government is much more focused on partnerships, not only but especially when it

comes to China. For example, the IR23 states that London alone does not have the means to influence China and must therefore work with allies worldwide, explicitly referencing cooperation with France, Germany, the EU and other European partners in the Indo-Pacific. At the UK-France summit in March 2023, the two governments agreed to explore coordinating deploying their respective aircraft carrier groups in the region on a rotating basis to establish a permanent European maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, the Sunak government is being careful not to distance itself from its allies in its rhetoric towards China; in terms of “toughness” towards Beijing, it positions itself between the United States and EU partners such as Germany and France.

Adjusted geographical priorities

A major challenge in the United Kingdom's global strategy is its geographically dispersed priorities given its limited resources. Even before Russia's war against Ukraine, the United Kingdom was criticised for not having the resources to simultaneously focus on Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Whereas Johnson emphasised the “tilt” towards the Indo-Pacific as the new centre of world politics, the IR21 had identified both regions as focal points. In contrast, the IR23 clearly identifies the Euro-Atlantic region as the United Kingdom's top priority, with a particular focus on Northern Europe. Supporting Ukraine against the Russian invasion and preventing Russia from achieving its strategic interests in Ukraine is currently defined as the main strategic goal.

Nevertheless, the strategy assigns an important role to the new network of “Atlantic-Pacific partnerships” and consolidates the “tilt” towards the Indo-Pacific. This is shown by the United Kingdom's willingness to share sensitive strategic technologies with its allies, such as nuclear-powered attack U-boats under the AUKUS agreement that it reached with the United States and Australia. The United Kingdom's decision to join the Comprehensive and Progressive

Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) reinforces this development. Moreover, the IR23 formulates the ambition to deepen or create defence relations and new frameworks in the Indo-Pacific and to establish a long-term strategic presence in the region.

The wider European neighbourhood, the Middle East, Africa and the Arctic follow as secondary priorities. The United Kingdom wants to remain active in these regions, but primarily in economic partnership with the states of these regions, while deployments such as in Iraq or Afghanistan are a thing of the past. Overall, the IR23 cannot resolve the contradiction of simultaneously expanding the country's presence in Europe and the Indo-Pacific despite only marginally increasing its resources.

Similarly to the IR21, the IR23 emphasises that London does not expect a bipolar competition of systems along the lines of the Cold War, but rather a more complex geostrategic competition in which “middle-ground states” increasingly play a decisive role. The United Kingdom wants to escape the simplistic dictum of a competition between democracies and autocracies and avoid cooperating exclusively with Western partners. Instead, it seeks to cooperate with other states, regardless of their internal constitutionality in terms of democracy and the rule of law; the prerequisite, however, is that these states support the basic pillars of the United Nations order.

Future relationship with the EU

The changed environment – Russia's war against Ukraine as well as domestic political changes in the United Kingdom – is most visibly reflected in how the United Kingdom positions itself strategically in Europe. The IR21 was the first post-Brexit UK strategy document. Underpinned by the Johnson government's decision to reject any structured foreign and security policy cooperation with the EU, the IR21 completely omitted the Union as a foreign policy partner (see SWP Comment 31/2021).

The IR23 leaves this ideological baggage behind and treats Brexit as a fact: With the divorce completed, the United Kingdom is still interested in working with the EU. This more pragmatic approach has been evident since the war on Ukraine began. For example, London has coordinated closely with the EU and the United States on sanctions against Russia, in the G7 and multilaterally. The United Kingdom also joined a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project on military mobility in 2022. Most recently, the Sunak government removed one of the main obstacles to closer cooperation with the EU by reaching an agreement with it on the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol (Windsor Framework) in March 2023 – without any major opposition in London. With its explicit reference to the Windsor Framework, the IR23 signals the United Kingdom's willingness to engage in further cooperation with the EU, though clearly based on a relationship of equals. For its part, the EU should explore this potential. Furthermore, the IR23 emphasises the United Kingdom's readiness to host the fourth meeting of the newly created European Political Community (EPC) in the second half of 2024.

However, London continues to position itself as an independent, Central European security actor. It has recently regained much of its attractiveness as a partner in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe through its decisive support for Ukraine. Although the United Kingdom is now more open to the EU, its real priority in Europe is – unsurprisingly – NATO and the development of bilateral relations. Consequently, the United Kingdom is participating in the “European Sky Shield Initiative” project initiated by Germany and affiliated with NATO.

Since 2021, the United Kingdom has further expanded its bilateral agreements with almost all European states, with a focus on Northern and Central Europe (see SWP Comment 14/2022). The IR23 identifies France as a key partner in foreign and security policy in Europe. Almost simultaneously with the publication, Sunak and Emmanuel

Macron agreed at the first British-French summit since Brexit to intensify their cooperation, particularly on foreign and security policy issues. They want to coordinate inter alia on cyber security issues as well as the deployment of aircraft carriers and nuclear weapons. Poland follows in second place as an important partner in Central Europe.

From Berlin's point of view, it is worth noting that, with regard to foreign and security policy, Germany is mentioned almost exclusively as a partner in multilateral contexts such as the G7, the transatlantic quad (Germany, France, United States, United Kingdom) and the E3 (Germany, France, United Kingdom). This signals that although Germany is considered a key partner in London for European policy, there is a lack of concrete bilateral initiatives on security and defence policy.

Limited increase in defence spending

One of the most critical domestic conflicts around the IR23 was the question of the size and timing of the increase in defence spending. The United Kingdom currently has the largest defence budget among European NATO states and has consistently met the 2 per cent defence spending target. At the same time, the British armed forces are struggling with equipment problems after 20 years of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The strategic presence in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific poses the risk of overstretching its forces. Added to this is the military support for Ukraine: Britain has supplied large quantities of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles as well as ammunition, and it has pledged to deliver Challenger 2 tanks, but it is still unclear whether and when all the delivered weapons can be replaced.

British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace has therefore called for a significant increase in the defence budget; according to him, the long-term goal should be spending 3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP)

on defence. After the resignation of Truss, however, Sunak set out to stabilise British fiscal policy and incur less new debt.

The new UK budget, which was unveiled right after the IR23's release, seeks to increase the defence budget by £5 billion over the next two years. The long-term goal is now a defence budget of 2.5 per cent of GDP "as fiscal and economic circumstances allow". Of the additional funding, just under £3 billion is to go to nuclear deterrence, including implementation of the AUKUS agreement; £2 billion is budgeted to replenish stockpiles following aid deliveries to Ukraine.

As a comparison, according to the "Ukraine Support Tracker" by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, the United Kingdom has provided a total of around €4.9 billion (approx. £4.3 billion) in military aid up to March 2023. With the bulk of the additional £5 billion going to nuclear deterrence, the pressure on the UK armed forces remains high.

A return to Realpolitik

The Sunak government's update of the Integrated Review is a departure from "Global Britain" and positions the United Kingdom for a more competitive international political environment. Russia is continually named as the most acute threat, and support for Ukraine is clearly prioritised. In its China policy, London positions itself alongside its allies and classifies the country as an "epoch-defining challenge" to the rules-based world order, but it still leaves room for cooperation on multilateral issues. The lynchpin of the strategic stock-taking remains the increased global competition that the United Kingdom and its Western partners must deal with.

To counter these threats, the United Kingdom is prioritising the role of its partners and adapting its geographical priorities. On the one hand, London is concentrating on the Euro-Atlantic region and wants to position itself as a key European security actor. Especially in Poland, the

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Baltic States, Sweden and Finland, as well as in Ukraine itself, the United Kingdom has gained a great deal of credibility – not least in comparison to Germany and France, which have been more hesitant to act from the perspective of states bordering Russia. Throughout this process, the IR23 also adjusts the weighting of the UK's European partnerships. Whereas Germany is assigned a less important role, at least in security policy, relations with Poland, the Baltic states and Ukraine are upgraded. Particular attention is paid to cooperation with France – also with a view to the Indo-Pacific region.

On the other hand, the United Kingdom is underpinning its presence in the Indo-Pacific: through AUKUS, its status as a dialogue partner of the ASEAN states and not least with the green light to join the CPTPP. The Indo-Pacific region is hence becoming a cornerstone of British foreign policy, with its main motive being to strengthen its partnership with the United States.

Furthermore, the IR23 reassesses the relationship with the EU. Conversely to the IR21, which completely excluded the EU, the IR23 emphasises that the current British government wants to cooperate pragmatically with the Union. Apart from further cooperation with Ukraine, however, it remains unclear how the strategic goals of the IR23 are to be implemented. For its part, the EU should use the current momentum and agree with the United Kingdom on specific goals and forms of enhanced cooperation. Rather than a structured formalised treaty for foreign and security policy coordination, the EU should itself pursue a pragmatic path that gradually deepens cooperation. This could take place, for example, within the framework of the EPC. Regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, sanctions could be coordinated more closely bilaterally, and further UK participation in PESCO projects could be advanced. At the same time, the EU should be more flexible when involving third countries in security

and defence policy projects: Norway, for instance, participates in the joint procurement of ammunition for Ukraine and in the European Defence Fund, but without much say in the matter. Given the economic importance of the British defence industry, a special solution would have to be found here.

Finally, considering the evolving global security landscape and the United Kingdom's objective to strengthen its national resilience, Germany should engage in deeper collaboration with the United Kingdom to sustain their important bilateral partnership. The 2021 Joint Declaration of intent on UK-German foreign policy cooperation provides a sound point of departure for this endeavour.

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