

Did the Sun Finally Set? The UK's Integrated Review on Defence and What Canada Can Learn from It

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Context

The British government finally published its [Integrated Review](#) last March, a year later than expected. Heralded as the most important review of the UK's place in the world since the end of the Cold War, the document covers all aspects of international politics. The title of the policy, “Global Britain in a Competitive Age,” signals the ambition embodied in its pages. For Boris Johnson, the aim is demonstrating that leaving the European Union (EU) has given the United Kingdom all the necessary latitude to maintain its influence and to continue playing a leading role in international affairs. The document is accompanied by a [Command Paper](#), in which the Ministry of Defence provides details on the future of the armed forces and a [strategy](#) for the defence industry.

As Canada seeks to review its [strategic planning](#), it is important that it takes note of the decisions made by one of its closest allies. To this end, Ottawa should work to integrate its defence capabilities. Rethinking acquisition programs, among other things in light of the growing importance of new technologies, also seems imperative. Canada will also have to develop a coherent and pragmatic [strategy](#) to frame its actions in the Indo-Pacific, a region which is at the heart of the return of great power [rivalry](#).

The Return of Geostrategic Competition

The policy document is pessimistic about the state of the international strategic environment: multipolarity is on the rise and threats to the UK are increasing. The threat from state actors is considered to be the most significant of all, a paradigm shift from its [previous](#) defence policy. North Korea and Iran are mentioned, but Russia remains the most acute and direct threat to London, both in terms of its nuclear capabilities and its control of [grey zone](#) activities. Still, it is China that is the UK's main concern, judging by this new strategic policy. China is described as a systemic competitor who poses the greatest threat to the economic security of the UK, with increasing power becoming a challenge to the security, values and political system of London and its allies. The document nevertheless reflects the [ambivalence](#) that reigns within the political class as to what posture to adopt. Indeed, the British government ends up beating around the bush by admitting that its relationship with China is made of both confrontation and cooperation. In this, the United Kingdom takes a [similar](#) position to that of the United States.

Faced with the challenges that states like Russia and China pose to the international order, the UK believes that defending the status quo is no longer enough. Consequently, the UK has announced that it wants to actively work to shape the [international order](#) of tomorrow. To achieve this, London is counting on the fact that the great and medium powers will be able to play an important role in the future if they manage to collaborate with each other. The United Kingdom therefore wishes to occupy a central place in the collective action of like-minded states, which suggests an increase in “[minilateral](#)” cooperation formats. London is seeking to assert itself as a security leader in the Euro-Atlantic region. To this end, it is pursuing the development of the [UK Joint Expeditionary Force](#), of which 10 states are now members. The Ministry of Defence also [reaffirmed](#) that the armed forces will continue to participate in NATO's forward presence program in Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea. At the same time, the UK is increasing its contribution to the NATO mission in [Iraq](#), and is sending [300 troops](#) to the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali.

But the most important news is Britain's return east of the Suez. The growing importance of the Indo-Pacific is reflected in a new strategy for establishing [military bases](#), the recent signing of defence agreements with [Japan](#) and [India](#), and the deployment of the new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth in the region. The latter will be [accompanied](#) by American and Dutch ships, in addition to participating in exercises with several European and Asian allies. Beyond this deployment, offshore patrol vessels will be stationed permanently in the region. The number of military attachés and diplomats stationed in Southeast Asia is also on the rise. Above all, the United Kingdom intends to cooperate closely with its closest ally, the United States. London is aiming for an even greater [cooperation](#) with Washington, especially within organizations like [Five Eyes](#) and NATO. The emphasis on the Atlantic Alliance and liberal democracies in British politics suggests that one of the goals of the British strategy is to [reassure](#) the Biden administration of the seriousness of its commitment to the international order. Also, it means transatlantic security will remain the UK's top priority, regardless of its rhetoric on the Indo-Pacific.

While cooperation with several European states is discussed – specifically with France, Germany and Ireland – almost no mention is made of the EU. Notwithstanding the residual acrimony linked to Brexit, the UK will have no choice but to work with the EU on the main issues put forward in its new strategic policy. So it is strange that London does not mention the EU when it comes to the Indo-Pacific, even though it has just released its own [strategy](#) for that region. The same goes for the security issue in the Euro-Atlantic region, where the EU seems to want to [cooperate](#) more, and could become a [privileged](#) interlocutor of the White House in this matter.

A Defence Policy for the Information Age

The UK recognizes the growing importance of new types of technological threats. It faces adversaries who, by their recourse to activities [below the threshold](#) of war, blur the traditional border between the civil and military domains, but also between war and peace. In this context, the government and the armed forces have put in place new approaches to national security, in particular by pursuing a whole-of-government approach that involves both defence and diplomacy, or even trade, development aid, and intelligence. This is already materializing by the [merger](#) between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Development, decided in 2020.

The Ministry of Defence continues the work started in the recent [Integrated Operating Concept](#). As its name suggests, this new approach aims to integrate the five domains (army, navy, air force, space, and cyber) of the British Armed Forces, to associate them with the other branches of the state and achieve interoperability between the UK and its allies in defence matters. Integration refers to the joint use of

naval, air, space and cyber capabilities in [multi-domain](#) operations. It is in these areas that most of the investments are made. In working to move the armed forces from the industrial age into the age of information systems, the goal remains largely to deter potential adversaries. The emphasis on [below-threshold](#) capabilities and societal resilience, however, broadens the scope of deterrence. This implies a new posture of strength, more assertive, more dynamic and an advanced and continuous deployment. All of this should allow for an adaptive capacity to enable more efficient decision-making and more timely action.

The creation of the National Cyber Force (NCF) is a step towards the integration of all the branches of the state. Its uniqueness is that it brings together elements of the armed forces (including a regiment dedicated to cyber warfare), as well as intelligence and civilian departments of the state. The institutional agility of the NCF means that all resources can also be put to the service of operations, both defensive and offensive. It therefore provides an undeniable advantage by making it possible to respond effectively to the threats and challenges of the [grey zone](#) posed by states such as [Russia](#) and China. The impact of attacks on [SolarWinds](#) or more recently on [Colonial Pipeline](#) illustrates the current fragility of critical infrastructure.

The key to integration and modernization is the development of enabling technological capacities. This refers to, among other things, data processing, artificial intelligence, bioengineering and quantum technologies. To achieve this, the UK's aim is to become a leader in research and development (R&D) in which an investment of 2.4% of the GDP is planned. In the space sector, this translates into the desire to [possess](#) 10% of the world market by 2030. In both R&D and space, leaving the EU involves significant financial losses for British institutions. The investments planned by London could, in the end, only serve to fill this shortfall caused by Brexit. The new [strategy](#) for the defence industry goes in this direction. The COVID-19 pandemic is currently highlighting the importance of maintaining production capacities and sovereign control of certain technologies. As a result, the United Kingdom decides to adopt a more [protectionist](#) posture in its acquisition programs. The importance of international competition will therefore be balanced by national security considerations in awarding contracts.

Who Benefits and Who Loses from the New Investments?

A significant portion of the planned investments is directed to the naval forces. The Royal Navy wants to establish itself as the [most powerful](#) navy in Europe and to reconnect with its capacity to project its power globally. Its plan involves the acquisition of 13 frigates (the goal is a fleet of 24 frigates), the replacement of their class of destroyers, and the development of a new model of multi-purpose vessels that can act as a platform for the embarkation of drones. New surface-to-surface missiles and seven submarines are also in development. The key to this naval reconfiguration is the commissioning of their two new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers.

The replacement of [submarines](#) dedicated to nuclear deterrence has also recently been confirmed. Importantly, the UK announces in the Integrated Review the development of new nuclear weapons and the [increase](#) in the total number of warheads it holds. The nuclear program will be carried out in close collaboration with Washington. This is a complete reversal of the British posture, which had reduced its nuclear arsenal since the end of the Cold War. The justifications for this change are very vague, with the UK content to say that it is the result of the increasing complexity of the international environment and the growth of technological threats. The [development](#) of Russian anti-missile capabilities could nevertheless be the real reason. One thing is certain, this decision is already [negatively](#) affecting the image of the United Kingdom and raising fears of a general increase in world nuclear stocks.

The Royal Air Force, meanwhile, continues to [acquire F-35 fighter jets](#). Their total number has nevertheless been reduced, so much so that American aircraft are currently on board the Queen Elisabeth aircraft carrier for its deployment in the Indo-Pacific. This situation may well [continue](#) in the future. This decision may be explained by the fact that the RAF is already working on a [6th generation fighter](#), scheduled to enter service in 2035, and which would be equipped with high-speed radar technologies and artificial intelligence. It is also investing in [drones](#), as much to support fighters as to eventually replace them. In addition, a space command now exists within the RAF with the aim of becoming an [important](#) player in this field that is more [contested](#) than ever. [1.4 billion pounds](#) will be invested in this area. London seeks, on the one hand, to protect itself from space threats using systems based on land and in space. On the other hand, it seeks to ensure [autonomous access](#) to space, which should be achieved in 2022 with the launching of satellites. With this launch capability, the development of a [British](#) satellite positioning system – which cooperated before Brexit with the European Galileo system – could see the light of day. Ultimately, London hopes to have the ability to monitor and defend British interests in and across space.

All of these measures are supported by a substantial increase in the defence [budget](#) to 2.2% of GDP. The new capacity acquisition program is estimated at nearly £24 billion over four years, the largest investment since the end of the Cold War. The United Kingdom is therefore [ranked 5th](#) among states in terms of military spending. However, cuts had to be made in order to reinvest in these new programs. The army has suffered the most in the armed forces, with its numbers reduced by 10,000 members. Another sector where cuts were expected is that of development aid. The latest expenditure review [reduced](#) overseas development aid from 0.7% to 0.5% of GDP, or a budget reduction by 25 to 30 billion pounds by 2025. This last point goes against the pan-government approach, and reduces the diplomatic and political influence of London. This consequently raises the question of the capacity of the armed forces to respond to increasingly diverse and non-military issues.

An Overly Ambitious Vision?

The new British policy is therefore a comprehensive strategy that does not compromise on its commitments. Concretely, three points cast doubt on the [feasibility](#) of the Integrated Review. For one, London is betting that a shift to high technology will allow its armed forces to maintain an advantage over potential adversaries. This choice implies an explosion in acquisition costs and, ultimately, increased technological dependence at the operational level. In this regard, Professor Peter Roberts [wonders](#) whether the UK is preparing for the conflict it wants to wage or the one it will have to wage. Second, the corollary of the technological shift is a choice of quality over quantity. Army uniformed personnel, for example, will drop to 73,000 in strength. Although historically low – unheard of since the [18th century](#) – the manpower problem arises when deployments increase at the same time. This issue is perhaps more glaring for the Royal Navy. Already, there is no guarantee that it will be able to [make full use](#) of its new aircraft carriers, because it does not possess the sufficient number of airplanes on board nor the necessary escort vessels. It will also be difficult to play a significant role in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions at the same time. Of the three, the financial question is the one which remains the most worrying and which leads the international community to remain skeptical. The National Audit Office already found the Ministry of Defence's plan to equip itself [unaffordable](#). The issue of post-COVID-19 public finances also represents a major issue and the Ministry of Defence could suffer the consequences. It is difficult to know what will be kept if the means run out, because the [absence](#) of compromise is accompanied by a lack of clarity as to the priorities according to the fields (space, cyber, maritime, etc.). As such, London seems to have departed from the definition given by John Lewis Gaddis of [grand strategy](#), “the process

by which ends are linked to means, intentions to capacities, objectives to resources.” Under these conditions, it is reasonable to question how London will be able to articulate a coherent action strategy.

Recommendations and Considerations for Canada

The work undertaken by the United Kingdom is as comprehensive as it is ambitious, and confirms trends already observed in the latest policies of other allies of Canada, such as Australia. Ottawa must know how to learn from this in order to better apprehend the future of its international relations. First, Canada's three closest allies – the US, UK and France – are now turning their attention to the [Indo-Pacific](#) region. Despite having become the new “center of the world,” Canada has yet to release documents outlining its role in it. Canada's ad hoc [presence](#) in the South China Sea and the [recent](#) security cooperation agreement with Japan indicate that Canada is keen to work with its partners in the region. If Canada seems to be living its “[Indo-Pacific moment](#),” it needs to tread carefully. Indeed, the region is at the heart of [tensions](#) between great powers and the risks of entanglement are great. Also, Ottawa has limited capacity. An increased presence in Asia is likely to jeopardize its commitments in Europe and the [Far North](#), where Canada is in a position to play a significant role. Not making the same overcommitment error as the UK is, in this sense, imperative. Without committing too quickly to the Indo-Pacific, Canada will still have to address the issue of its difficult relationship with China. The Canadian government [ambivalence](#) increasingly looks out of place. Unable to act alone against the Chinese giant, Canada must, more than ever, join forces with other liberal democracies to face this challenge.

Second, it is necessary to think about and put in place a whole-of-government approach to defence and security. The federal budget recently published by the government unfortunately remains silent on these [issues](#). However, it is essential that Ottawa begins a proper reflection on [foreign policy](#) – the last white paper on the issue dates back to 2005 – followed by corresponding investments. The armed forces, for their part, have [embarked](#) on a welcome turn to the information age. The use of new technologies by the armed forces does not necessarily have to turn into dependence on them, which could happen in the UK. The example of [France](#) represents a relevant alternative model for the use of technology and its incorporation into military and non-military means. In the face of new cyber threats, disinformation or interference in elections, however, it is the entire state apparatus that will have to work together to defend Canadian [interests](#). To do this, Canada will need to rely on new technologies. While it can boast of having a lead in certain areas such as [artificial intelligence](#), in the future it will be necessary to invest in [R&D](#) and ensure to maintain sovereign production capacities, the importance of which has been reiterated many times during the [pandemic](#). Canada can draw inspiration here from the new British industrial policy, which considers it important to support domestic industry and to retain sovereign know-how and capabilities. [Australia](#) and [Germany](#) recently made a similar choice.

Third, Canada needs to review the way it conducts its procurement programs. On the one hand, the speed of current technological development is at odds with its traditionally lengthy processes of purchasing platforms designed to be in commission for decades. The risk being a quicker obsolescence of newly acquired equipment. The United Kingdom is already planning the development of the 6th generation fighter which will replace its F-35 (5th generation) while Canada is still procrastinating on the model which will replace its old 4th generation CF-18s. The Department of National Defence must focus on more [flexible](#) systems and procurement processes that will better adapt to technological advancements. On the other hand, better supervision and accountability of acquisition projects appear inevitable. In this regard, the recent [report](#) of the Parliamentary Budget Officer on the new Canadian frigate program is revealing. Now estimated at [\\$77 billion](#), the total cost has tripled since its inception. The [opacity](#) surrounding the contract and the lack of accountability of decision makers undermine trust

in institutions. Public finances will be under pressure following the pandemic and [difficult choices](#) will have to be made within the armed forces. Many ships and aircraft will need to be replaced in the coming years if Canada is to maintain its capabilities, especially its [submarines](#) and [icebreakers](#). It is high time that Canada undertakes a discussion on these complex and important issues if it wishes to remain relevant on the international stage.