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What does the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy mean for Euro-Atlantic cooperation?

EVENT REPORT



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The United Kingdom's new review of security and foreign policy has been heralded as a radical post-Brexit shift to a 'global Britain', but senior British officials have reassured allies that the plan will not weaken the UK's commitment to NATO and European security, or British support for nuclear disarmament.

"As we assessed our interests and assessed our existing position in the international order, it was quite clear that our interests are global as well as they are European and, in some respects, were becoming more global, from economic interests through to security interests," explained **John Bew**, Special Adviser on Foreign Policy to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and author of 'Realpolitik: A History', told a Friends of Europe online debate on March 30.

Despite that global perspective, the review's much-publicised 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific region, and reductions in tanks and troop numbers which have raised concern in NATO, Bew insisted the UK remains firmly engaged in Europe.

"The UK is not, in any way, packing its bags and becoming less European in leaving the European Union, that's an important thing that was really strongly said in the review. There has been that pre-existing and strong and reinforced and increased commitment to NATO," he told the event. "The pre-condition of global Britain, the precondition of having this broader perspective and approach, is the security of our homeland and the Euro-Atlantic area."

As an example, Bew emphasised the British pledge to spend 2.2% of gross domestic product on defence, placing it among the minority of European allies who meet NATO's 2% target. According to 2020 data from the Alliance, just 11 of the 30 allies spend 2% or more. The UK is listed on 2.32%, exceeded by only Estonia, Greece and the United States.

Bew joined **Samantha Job**, Director for Defence and International Security at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, in explaining the review. They fielded questions from some of the around 200 stakeholders who joined the debate on the policy paper entitled 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age' which was published on March 16.

The British officials explained the review was a 'long overdue' reassessment of strategy to meet modern challenges by pulling together all strands of security, defence, development and foreign policy.

"This is not a classic defence review or national security strategy that the 20th century might have written for us," Job said. "This is a fully integrated approach and that is because that is how we see the world, that is how we see other actors operating, that is how we think we need to be most effective on the international stage, to be able to pull all of those levers together."

They outlined the four main pillars of the review:

1. Sustaining strategic advantage through science and technology: a priority is to work with allies and partners through 'co-creation' on vital science and technology advances. The strategy recognises 'that the industry ... is very much collaborative across geographical boundaries' and that S&T is increasingly becoming a tool of power and influence. It also requires a protective element in restricting access to vital technology, Job added.

2. Shaping the open international order of the future: this recognises the UK's role as a defender of the international status quo and international system, said Bew. It involves taking a more proactive approach to reinforcing parts of the system that are under threat, including by standing up for human rights and democracy, but also looking to protect areas such as the digital economy, space and cyberspace. This section also sets out the UK's posture in the world, Job said. For all the talk of a 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific' there is an 'unequivocal commitment to security for the European and Euro Atlantic area' she reiterated. Both officials stressed the continuing focus on working with allies and partners. "We would love to be able to change the world on our own, but that is not the world we live in," Job said. "We need to work through alliances, through partnerships,"

3. Strengthening security and defence at home and overseas: this requires a 'clear-eyed' assessment of the shape of future conflict. Job explained the focus on areas such as cyber and space, but also insisted the planned modernisation encompassed conventional forces to ensure they are 'technologically advanced and ready for the 21st century.' There will also be an integrated engagement with partners around the world. That integration of policy strands is highlighted by the decision to merge the Department for International Development into the Foreign Office. Bew also stressed the EU's pledge to increase defence spending and its commitment to collective security.

4. Building resilience at home and overseas: Bew mentioned climate change and strengthening the global health system as two elements at the centre of the drive for resilience. He pointed to British support for the international vaccine alliance Gavi and the COVAX initiative to guarantee equitable global access to COVID-19 vaccines, as well as support for an international pandemic preparedness treaty. He described the fight against climate change as 'our number one international priority'. "Resilience comes from alliances, partnerships, relationships and reaching out to others," Job said. She pointed out that the ideas of building a 'whole-of-society' approach to resilience was also being looked at by allies, including through discussions on NATO's Strategic Concept and the EU's Strategic Compass.

Among the many participants responding to the UK presentation, **Rose Gottemoeller**, Payne Distinguished Lecturer at Stanford University and former Deputy Secretary General of NATO, welcomed the UK review as timely in the context of NATO's 2030 process to modernise and strengthen the Alliance.

"The integrated review and the very thoughtful process that the UK has gone through can only help and support NATO in its effort to fashion a new Strategic Concept," she said. "So, I welcome it very, very much from that perspective."

However, Gottemoeller was also among many who had some 'sharp questions' on the British plan. In particular, she questioned how the decision to raise Britain's nuclear warhead ceiling to 260 would tie into international arms-control discussions.

The nuclear issue was a hot topic for a number of other participants.

Ian Bond, Director of Foreign Policy at the Centre for European Reform and former British diplomat, asked about the raising of the warhead ceiling, but also queried if the review's use of the word 'tripwire' in describing Britain's forward presence in Estonia represented a 'lowering of the nuclear threshold', given the loaded connotations of that phrase in nuclear diplomacy.

On a similar line, **Paul Taylor**, senior fellow at *Friends of Europe* and a contributing editor at POLITICO Europe, raised questions about the 'shrinking' of the British army under the plan. He warned that would weaken the UK's ability to contribute to the territorial defence of Europe which has been a NATO priority since Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea. "If we have thinner, smaller forces, however nimble they are, and we have less to deal with conventional warfare, doesn't it inevitably lower the nuclear threshold?"

Given the increase in Britain's nuclear warhead limit, **Alexey Gromyko**, Director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, asked if the UK would be willing to join US-Russian consultations on strategic stability beyond the New START treaty which was renewed for five years by presidents Biden and Putin in January.

Job sought to allay participants' nuclear concerns.

"Our nuclear doctrine, and posture, has not changed ... our commitment to the arms control and disarmament agenda, which the UK has always been an active member of, that has not changed either," said Job. "The fundamental picture hasn't changed, what's happened is that the numbers have needed to change in response to this strategic scenario."

She pointed out that the change was in line with the maintenance of the UK's 'minimum credible deterrence'. The 'very small tweak' of the numbers was needed, from the current ceiling of 225, to take account of the strategic situation.

Other questions covered issues such as Hong Kong, calls for a 'feminist foreign policy', relations with China and Russia, and maritime security. In response to a question from Bruno Reis, advisor to the Portuguese Defence Minister, on the latter, Job said the UK would uphold a 'multidimensional' approach working with a number of international players.

Several contributors questioned if the UK was risking overstretch through its 'global Britain' ambitions, which involve dispatching a naval force spearheaded by new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth to the Indo-Pacific region, sending army units to East Africa and other far-flung deployments, on top of commitments to NATO.

Jamie Shea, Professor of Strategy and Security at the University of Exeter, *Friends of Europe* Senior Fellow for Peace, Security and Defence and former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for emerging security challenges at NATO, asked which capabilities the UK would need in order to project the new global focus; and what trade-offs are needed to match the call for more nimble, technologically enabled forces with the 'mass' of logistics and other capabilities needed to maintain a global presence.

Gottemoeller too asked if the review wasn't 'too broad' with perhaps a contradiction in the aim to deploy naval forces to the Indo-Pacific while seeking to reduce 'costly platforms' elsewhere.

"How much of an Asian power are we going to be? What are we actually going to do with those aircraft carriers when we get there? And how plausible is it for the UK to be able to project power so far from our home base?" asked Taylor.

Bew pointed out that the defence of British interests around the world would not always require a resource-dependent military response. For example, he said, in

the Indo-Pacific it was clear that the UK would take a 'diplomacy first approach', for example by deepening ties with regional organisations. Other aspects of soft power will also remain important, he said, referring to the UK's aid budget which, proportionally, remains the second highest in the G-7. Recent cuts, the British officials said, would be temporarily.

Earlier, Bew pointed to the UK's adoption last year of a 'Magnitsky Act' to punish foreign human rights abusers; and the opening of a path to British citizenship for Hong Kong residents in response to China's crackdown on democracy in the territory, as examples of important foreign policy initiatives.

In the wake of Brexit, the UK's relationship with the EU was another issue that generated considerable interest from those joining the online debate.

"Given the emphasis on seeking alliances and partnerships, in rule-setting and shaping international norms, as well as things like resilience and tackling transnational threats, isn't the omission of a positive message about a future engagement with the EU extremely glaring and therefore makes the review somewhat unbalanced?" **Alison Weston**, Head of Division for Partnerships and Agreements at the European External Action Service (EEAS), asked on the event chat line.

Alexandre Escorcica, from the French Delegation to NATO, questioned the UK representatives about the shape of the future relationship with the EU; and Senator **Hélène Conway-Mouret**, Secretary of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee in the French Senate, asked about how they saw the development of defence industry cooperation with France and the EU.

In reply, Job said the UK will be looking closely at how the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative develops; and will keep under review the relationship with the EU on industrial development and more generally on security and defence. However, she suggested the focus would be on arrangements on a bilateral basis or with small groups of EU countries.

"The relationships with individual member states are very strong. We don't think we need an overarching kind of formal agreement to have relationships with the European Union themselves as well," she said. "A period building will be required there."

However, she said the 'UK will be ready to work with the European Union' and urged greater cooperation between NATO and the EU.

"It's also a priority for a lot of people that NATO and the European Union work together, that the two ... become partners in security, including in some of these newer areas of technologies and resilience, so that the two organizations are reinforcing one another and raising everybody's security, and that they don't become somehow in competition," Job concluded.

