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DEFENCE IN A COMPETITIVE AGE 2021: A REVIEW

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Introduction

Defence in a Competitive Age, 2021 is a document released by the British Government detailing changes in the organization of the Royal Armed Forces. Also called the Integrated Review (IR), this document is classified as a command paper, which is a formal paper presented to the British parliament under the command of ‘Her Majesty.’¹ It is important to note that Defence in a Competitive Age is not a standalone piece. It was presented six days after the release of ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age’, a review of Britain’s armed forces, international security goals, and strategies. The British government has conducted similar reviews in the past. But what sets this apart is the fact that 21st century UK has undergone radical changes. Its hostilities with Russia and China, withdrawal from the European Union, adapting to technological changes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflicts in the Middle East are all on the rise. This prompts the need for the UK to reorient its goals and identify its immediate and long-term priorities.

The document highlights the spending of 188 billion pounds over four years; a 14% increase in the UK’s budget allocation for security purposes.² A noteworthy feature of the Defence Secretary’s foreword is the emphasis on the term ‘Global Britain.’ Despite Brexit and the UK taking a turn towards protectionism, the document wishes to establish Britain as a more global “problem-solving” and “burden-sharing” power. While it agrees that previous reviews of the same kind have not achieved their objectives, the futuristic structure of this document provides the impression that the UK is ready to embrace new and more developed security measures.

¹ “Government Publications (Command Papers).” n.d. UK Parliament.

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/publications/government/#:~:text=Command%20Papers%20are%20government%20papers.>

² Defence, Ministry of. 2021. “Defence in a Competitive Age.” p.2

Britain's Strategic Changes

Trends in Security

An important point of focus in the document is the interconnectedness between the different aspects of security. It primarily highlights four main trends which form the foundation of the entire security strategy of the United Kingdom.³

1. Geopolitical/Geo-economic shifts.
2. Systemic Cooperation between democratic and authoritarian systems.
3. Rapid technological changes.
4. Transnational challenges such as biosecurity, climate change, organised crime, and terrorism.

While previous versions of the UK's defence review documents have discussed security from a conventional standpoint, this places more emphasis on other security threats from ecological, health, and technological perspectives. Threats are not just viewed from a British but a truly global perspective. It was interesting to see that while the document considers China's rise as a 'systemic challenge', it looks at Russia as its biggest military threat.⁴ the UK's economic dependence on China is also subtly implied, making this a straightforward and practical defence review. The document brings a new understanding of threat assessment by discussing emerging concepts in security domains like CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear), the environment, cyberspace, and space. It is true that we live in a world where security issues – being increasingly universal – prompt the cohesive functioning of multiple domains like the armed forces, cybersecurity experts, etc. The UK's multi-domain approach, if executed right, can show a great evolution in its defence sector.

³ Ibid. p.4

⁴ Ibid. p.4

Integrated Security

In its second section, the IR discusses the importance of bringing the armed forces, and the space and cybersecurity domains together to enhance capabilities. Throughout, there are recurring comparisons of the UK's military capabilities to that of China's and Russia's. The document may wish to project an image of being well-aware of its rivals' strategic capabilities, to catch them off-guard. It also expresses a deep interest in further exploring the cyber and space domains. The IR believes that conventional war will go beyond tanks, aircraft, and ships. Now, with only a click of a button, the computer systems of any nation in the world can be compromised making cybersecurity all the more important. What makes the IR a fascinating document is its focus on improving Britain's weaknesses. It acknowledges the strength of its enemies to expose its weakness and therefore calls for a change in approach.⁵ Its idea of an 'Integrated Operating Concept' lays out its intention to be well-prepared for future threats while focusing on increasing current capabilities.⁶

Bridging the Local and Global

Another important step towards creating a global Britain is to improve its technological capabilities. The IR astutely does that as well. While it recognizes that adversaries like China and Russia are shifting towards hybrid warfare and bringing all domains of warfare together, there is a necessity to reconcile the domestic and international goals of Britain. A sound domestic strategy will serve as a foundation for Britain's new foreign policy objectives. On a related note, the significance of domestic cohesion is highlighted in the fact

⁵ Ibid. p.8

⁶ Ibid. p. 11

that the IR aspires to provide equal importance to all of the United Kingdom, including Scotland, Ireland, and Wales.⁷

Improving Homeland Security Measures

One of the most important attributes of a well-functioning nation lies in the quality of its civil-military relations. The IR doesn't fail to look at the importance of this aspect. The defence department ensures support to civil authorities during times of disaster – ranging from climate threats to terrorism – and CBRN issues. A chart on the document also reveals the UK's plan to secure its homeland. The plan towards a 'global' Britain should start locally. Only by improving its local capabilities, can the UK better project its power in the face of its adversaries.

The threat of CBRN weapons deserves special attention. The idea of conventional war has been taken to the next level by these revolutionary technologies. While there are more indirect threats like cybersecurity, it is CBRN issues that can cause the most serious damage in terms of loss of life. Despite the document committing to contribute to a world without nuclear weapons, there is a great emphasis on the construction of nuclear submarines and missiles. The IR sees these naval nuclear weapons as deterrents to issues posed by rivals. But as adversarial nations like Russia and China continue to develop their nuclear arsenals, the UK needs to build on its capabilities if it aspires to oppose them. Even in terms of CBRN threats, the IR does not fail to mention the importance of providing support to NATO members.

Increasing Overseas Engagement

⁷ Ibid. p. 58

Britain's intention to be 'global' can only happen if it focuses on establishing and improving its defence ties with allies and partner nations. The IR elucidates Britain's international commitments well. During a period when the world sees Britain as being conservative, it reiterates that Brexit does not mean a cutting of ties with important European partners, especially the NATO members. It is also important to note that the document does not just emphasize the importance of allies but wishes to bring the British diaspora across the world together to bring different perspectives of security together.

International Partnerships and a Tilt Towards the Indo-Pacific

The integrated review's particular attention to regional issues and partnerships pertaining to the British military lends it great value. It clearly outlines the importance of the area, the scope for cooperation and measures for providing defence assistance as a way of British power projection. While it is clear about NATO as its primary international commitment, it also deeply discusses the Five Eyes, GCC, ECOWAS etc. the IR also discusses the UK's tilt towards the Indo-Pacific. In an age where China is on a path to becoming a hegemon, the Indo-pacific is a direct target. Therefore, the region needs as much international assistance to protect itself.

The IR credits India for being a key reason behind the UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific.⁸ It shows the increasing relevance and necessity of India's capabilities on the global stage today. Whether it's strengthening economic ties or increasing strategic cooperation, India is an important partner. The UK government has also reaffirmed its support through Boris Johnson's visit to India in 2022. This shows the UK's commitment

⁸ Ibid p. 31

to enforcing the principles of the document. interesting IR also shares many similarities with India’s plan of action in the Indo-Pacific⁹, indicating a potentially smooth road ahead for India-UK relations.

Early Steps: the Ukraine Conflict

The Integrated Review has seen its fair share of praise and criticism. It is important to note that the review, so far, has largely remained true to its word. The best example to show that is the Ukraine conflict. This is the first practical application of the document since its drafting in 2021. While it has been critiqued for being soft and not addressing immediate concerns enough¹⁰, one can argue that it is still a step in the right direction. In a world where nations make plain commitments and tend not to live by them most of the time, the IR has been true to its purpose.

Throughout the document, there is a focus on Russia being an immediate threat. By reaffirming the North Atlantic Treaty, the UK has been strong in its support of Ukraine while still not directly being caught in the crossfire. From the UK's vantage point, it is reasonable to treat Russia as a more threatening adversary than China.

Diplomacy and Defence Assistance

⁹ Mishra, Vivek. 2022. “Boris Johnson’s India Visit: Prioritising Bilateral Agendas over Timing.” ORF. April 21, 2022. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/boris-johnsons-india-visit/>.

¹⁰ Cordesman, Anthony H. 2021. “Global Britain in a Competitive Age and Defence in a Competitive Age: A Critique.” CSIS, July.

Today, as much of the international community is increasingly aware of China and Russia as competitors, now is more important than ever for the west to collaborate and the rest of the world. The IR has done a fine job in emphasizing the importance of diplomacy and international partnerships. A truly integrated defence document should also focus on diplomacy as a support system. By iterating on the points of having a large defence diplomacy cadre and helping allies increase capabilities¹¹, it shows that the UK is willing to take a softer approach when necessary. The best way towards a ‘global’ Britain is to increase defence collaboration and “building partners’ capacity.”

The Future of the UK’s Defence Capabilities

The Human Resource Element

The IR, for the most part, speaks of increasing Britain’s national security from a technological standpoint. However, the document successfully addresses the use of human resources. It discusses offering apprenticeship opportunities to 80% of recruits, with a third of those in science and technology. Especially in a place like the UK where migration is commonplace, diversity in government offices generates participation. By having a specific clause on increasing inclusivity, the IR has managed to provide a sense of compassion and hope. The IR even pledges to work on modernizing and improving the pay grade of military personnel. What strengthens the document is the fact that it also considers the importance of veterans in the army. Having a specific department for veteran affairs is a commendable initiative.¹²

Modernizing the Armed Forces

¹¹ Defence, Ministry of. 2021. “Defence in a Competitive Age.” p. 14-15

¹² Ibid. p. 34-36

The final section of the IR has a more technical approach that may not appeal to the layperson. However, it lays a foundation for the British Armed Forces' future aspirations regarding weapons systems. Apart from integrating the armed forces, the government intends to spend at least 6.6 billion pounds on research and development. The IR shows the UK's enthusiasm to train its armed forces to face threats today and be ready for those tomorrow. It provides an insight into many of the UK's ambitious goals of relying on future technology like AI, cyberspace, and space domains to improve defence capabilities. It discusses replacing many old weapons with newer ones. For instance, the British Army revealed its intentions of retiring the CH-47 Chinook helicopters and upgrading the AH-64 Apache helicopters. The British air force will retire the E-3D Sentry, Hawk T1, and Typhoon Tranche 1 for three E-7A Wedgetails. The royal navy's initiative of focusing more on shipbuilding is a welcome one as it puts the nation on the international market and contributes to its long term economic and defence growth¹³. All of these measures, hoping for their timely application, will truly aid in the rise of a 'global' UK.

Lessons For India

Assuming that the UK successfully implements all the plans outlined in the IR, it could serve as a great study and inspiration for India's future defence aspirations. India is an emerging player on the global stage and possesses one of the largest armed forces in the world. India, in collaboration with many nations, can significantly improve its defence sector and scope of developing futuristic weapons systems. Cooperation with other states is crucial for India's growth on the global stage. In many aspects, India has potential but is still relatively underdeveloped in the defence arena. What it needs now is a concrete plan like this to take the right steps towards increasing its international presence. Even at the domestic level, India has a lot to take away from the IR. Whether it's empowering its veterans, offering apprenticeship opportunities, or promoting inclusivity, there is a lot that the Indian government could emulate in their own policies. The IR

¹³ Ibid. p.37-56

also outlines a plan for financially and environmentally sustainable use of resources to make weapons, an aspect that is useful for India to further look into as well. So far, the UK has been proactive in implementing the IR, as demonstrated by their response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. If the future application of the document is as effective as its principles and intentions, it can positively be said that the British defence sector will set high standards in the years to come.

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