Footnotes to Churchill?: British Security and Defence in the Age of Putin and Trump

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Resumé

Brexit efterlämnade Storbritannien utan en tydlig utrikespolitisk roll, men Putins invasion av Ukraina och Trumps återkomst till presidentposten har tvingat fram en strategisk ompositionering. Storbritanniens traditionella "särskilda relation" med USA har försvagats av Trumps oberäkneliga "America First"-politik och ifrågasättande av Nato-garantier. Som svar har Storbritannien återvänt till sin historiska roll som motståndare till kontinentala hegemoner och fokuserat på att stärka Europas kollektiva säkerhet. Genom nya försvarsavtal med Tyskland (Trinity House, Kensington) och förnyat samarbete med Frankrike (Lancaster House) samt ett strategiskt partnerskap med EU har Storbritannien byggt upp ett nätverk av bilaterala och multilaterala säkerhetsarrangemang. Särskilt fokus ligger på "det bredare norr" - Nordatlanten, Arktis och Östersjön - där Storbritannien leder Joint Expeditionary Force och Natos Forward Land Force i Estland. Denna strategi syftar till att "bli mindre beroende av Amerika, samtidigt som man förblir oskiljaktigt knuten till Amerika" och positionera Storbritannien som en central aktör i en stärkt europeisk försvarspelare inom Nato.

We will continue to strengthen our partnership with the United States, our closest defence and security ally…. At the same time, it has been made crystal clear that European defense must step up and rebalance for our collective security, and the UK has taken that challenge seriously. Our approach is to become less dependent on America, while remaining inseparably linked to America.

Rt.Hon. Lord Peter Mandelson,
UK Ambassador to the United States of America[1]

DEAN ACHESON, U S secretary of state in the Truman Presidency, famously said that 'Great Britain has lost an empire but not yet found a role'.[2] The response often given to this by British diplomats was to refer back to Winston Churchill's 1948 idea of the UK being positioned 'at the very point of junction' between three concentric circles: the British Commonwealth, the English-speaking world (most importantly, the United States) and Europe. By levering its position in each circle as a 'pivotal power', Britain could retain its influence as a global actor and 'punch above its weight'. The two most important circles were the United States and Europe. As an island nation situated straddling the

Atlantic Ocean and the English Channel, and one anchored—until Brexit—in both NATO and the EU, the UK could play a pivotal role as what Tony Blair termed a 'transatlantic bridge'.[3]

> *Brexit, however, diminished the UK's international weight and diplomatic influence.*

Brexit, however, collapsed one end of this bridge, severely weakening the 'transatlantic bridge'. The UK had long been the EU's 'awkward partner', and the Brexit referendum of 2016 led the UK to make the monumental step of leaving the EU. Brexit, however, diminished the UK's international weight and diplomatic influence. 'Outside the EU', Peter Ricketts has written, 'Britain is more dependent on its strategic partnership with the US, but less useful to Washington given its lack of leverage in Europe'.[4] Once again, therefore, Britain was left without a clear foreign policy role. Successive Conservative governments sought to offer a positive spin on the foreign policy consequences of Brexit and put forward the notion of 'Global Britain'. Freed from the shackles of Brussels, it was argued, Global Britain was now free to pursue its own global economic and diplomatic interests, secure in the reassuring and comforting embrace of the 'Special Relationship' with the United States. Europe and the EU would have diminished importance for 'Global Britain'. The UK would retain some influence in Europe through NATO, supplemented by bilateral relations with key European partners, but would be free to carve out a more independent and prominent role on the global stage, leaving European security in the safe hands of the United States.

This Panglossian view of Global Britain's new role was severely tested by the first Trump administration (2017-21) and evaporated following Putin's 'special military operation' in February 2022; it has been further discredited since Trump's return to the Presidency. The new Labour Government of Sir Keir Starmer has faced a deteriorating European security environment, whilst grappling with the challenge of managing an unpredictable and whimsical Trump administration, whose actions and words have cast doubt on NATO's Article V security guarantee and the US commitment to European defence.

Putin's war and intensified Russian 'grey zone' aggression across Europe has served to rekindle some deeply held and historically rooted primal instincts in British foreign policy. Concerned with the implications of Russian recidivism and territorial aggrandizement for the European balance of power, the UK is focusing once again on the collective security of Europe. It is returning to what Winston Churchill called 'a wonderful unconscious tradition of British foreign policy', namely to 'oppose the strongest, most aggressive, most dominating Power on the continent' and 'preserve the liberties of Europe'.[5] British policy in the face of Putin's aggression and Trump's unreliability has focused on resetting its relations with the EU and revitalising a web of bi- and minilateral forms of cooperation with key European partners. It has also striven to play a leading role in strengthening the European pillar of NATO and bolster Europe's collective resolve to confront a recidivist Russia. This has also involved working closely with the French to forge a European 'coalition of the willing' able to provide a reassurance force for Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire or peace settlement.

The 'Special Relationship': Not so special anymore?

This flurry of diplomatic activity, however, cannot disguise the underlying dilemmas now facing British foreign and security policy, nor the lack of an underlying grand strategy to give coherence and purpose to the UK's political, economic, diplomatic and military policies.[6] From the early 1940s onwards, Britain has sought to offset its declining influence in international politics by cultivating a multifaceted 'Special Relationship' with Washington – a grand strategy began by Winston Churchill. Throughout the cold war, NATO was the lynchpin of British security policy, and close ties with Washington provided the lodestar of its foreign policy. This transatlantic orientation was consolidated ever more firmly after the Suez debacle of 1956, which demonstrated Britain's loss of great power status and the realities of a bipolar world. The conclusion drawn by the British foreign policy elite was that henceforth the UK should draw ever closer to Washington, serving—as Macmillan once quipped—as the latter-day Greeks to America's new Rome.[7]

'All British foreign policy since 1940 has been footnotes to Churchill', Timothy Garton Ash once argued, a legacy defined by 'unambiguous commitment to the United States, ambiguous commitment to Europe'.[8] When push comes to shove, London has always prioritized relations with Washington over those with its European partners—as the 2003 invasion of Iraq illustrates. UK security and defence policy has been grounded on the 'Special Relationship' with the United States, and the British armed forces have long assumed that they will be operating primarily alongside their American counterparts. As a cable from the US Embassy in London back to Washington noted in 2007, 'The UK's commitment of resources—financial, military, diplomatic—in support of US global priorities remains unparalleled'.[9]

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Given the deeply Atlanticist assumptions of generations of British politicians, diplomats and soldiers, the second Trump administration has come as a severe shock. Trump's relentless focus on 'America First' and his ruthlessly transactional and notoriously unpredictable approach to U S security guarantees to Europe have derailed the foundational assumptions of British foreign and security policy. Whilst the UK expected Trump's return to lead to ructions and rhetorical fireworks, few in London were prepared for the rapidity of the rapprochement with Moscow; the shabby treatment of President Zelensky in the Oval Office; the open disdain towards Europe; or the disparagement of past British and European contributions to US-led military operations. Trump's 'peace policy' has been viewed as rewarding Russian aggression and acquiescing to Putin's narrative on the war. Parallels have frequently been drawn with the Munich betrayal of 1938. Trump's comments about 'cut-off switches' have also fed doubts about the future reliability of high-tech military equipment purchased from the United States.[10] More generally, comments from Trump and others in his administration have cast doubt on the reliability of the American commitment to the NATO and European security.

The Labour government has attempted to deal with the mercurial nature of the Trump administration as a challenge that must be

managed and finessed. It has assiduously sought to flatter and court the Trump administration, pandering to Trump's Scottish roots and Anglophile instincts and even playing the card of offering a state visit hosted by King Charles III. Sir Keir Starmer has broadly succeeded in cultivating a good relationship with Trump, whilst Foreign Minister David Lammy hosted Vice President Vance during the latter's family holiday in the Cotswold in August 2025. The UK does not have a significant trade deficit with the USA and carefully avoided inflammatory statements hoping thereby to avoid a transatlantic trade war. The government felt it had done well when Trump only imposed 10% tariffs on the UK as opposed to 15% on the EU. 'The UK is very well protected', Trump declared in May 2025 at the G7 summit when the tariff threat was raised; 'You know why? Because I like them. That's their ultimate protection'.[11]

President Trump's state visit to Britain will take place from 17-19 September 2025. It is likely to be accompanied by the full panoply of Royal pomp and circumstance—as well as widespread protests. Beyond the exquisite ceremonials and sycophantic speeches, however, there is a growing recognition in the British political class and defence establishment that the transatlantic security relationship is far less solid than it was, and that an unpredictable Trump administration cannot be relied upon to honour its treaty commitments to European security. The fleeting whims of a mercurial and notoriously thin-skinned President are not sound foundations for a country's security policy. As a middle power and maritime trading nation, the UK has a vital interest in the preservation of a rules-based liberal and multilateral world order; the Trump administration is no longer committed to this. It now pursues a transactional 'America First' foreign policy that serves its own narrowly defined national interests.

There is therefore a renewed appreciation in London of UK's European location and vocation, and a recognition that the UK shares many more economic, political and security interests with its European neighbours than it does with the USA. To this end, the Starmer government has built on the groundwork laid by the previous Conservative government of Rishi Sunak and sought a reset in the UK's relations with the EU and key European allies. As Ambassador Mandelson has said, the UK recognises that Europe must 'step up' and shoulder more of the burden for its own collective security, and its approach is 'to become less dependent on America, while remaining inseparably linked to America'.

Reset with Europe: (1) Germany

The reset with Europe has proceeded along three tracks: forging a new strategic partnership with Germany; revitalising the *entente cordiale* with France; and negotiating a new security and defence relationship with the EU. Relations with Germany were initially prioritised, in part because the assumption in London was that the quickest and surest road to Brussels lies through Berlin. Germany, it was believed, was both a key actor in the EU and more sympathetic to British interests than France, Spain or Italy. Rishi Sunak's Conservative government had already initiated contacts with Berlin on a new defence cooperation treaty, which was viewed as the first pillar of a wider UK-Germany bilateral treaty. The new Labour government ramped up negotiations with Scholz's government and in July 2024 a *Joint Declaration on Enhanced Defence Cooperation* was agreed. This committed both sides to 'enhanced partnership and defence cooperation',

focusing on defence-industrial cooperation, strengthening deterrence on NATO'S eastern flank, enhancing interoperability, support for Ukraine and the development of a joint deep precision strike capability.[12]

> *The two countries will work more closely together in terms of joint training and exercises, logistics and operational doctrine.*

This was followed on 23 October 2024 by the *Trinity House Agreement on Defence* which was heralded as a 'milestone moment' that 'marked a fundamental shift in the UK's relationship with Germany and for European security'.[13] It covered further defence-industrial projects between Europe's two largest defence spenders, as well as new 'totemic lighthouse projects' in military cooperation (such as the German-British Amphibious Engineer Battalion 130 in Minden). The agreement outlined new forms of defence cooperation across the 'Wider North' (which includes the North Atlantic, Arctic and Baltic Sea region). Central to this is the focus on the Baltic states where both the UK and Germany lead NATO Forward Land Forces. To ensure a more cohesive deterrent posture, the two countries will work more closely together in terms of joint training and exercises, logistics and operational doctrine—'using the front as a catalyst for developing new ways of fighting'.[14] German P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft will operate out of RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland as part of a broader goal of integrating operational capabilities and bolstering maritime security in the North Atlantic and Baltic Sea. This will include joint efforts to protect critical underwater infrastructure and develop new underseas surveillance technologies. An overarching theme in the agreement is the need to ensure interoperability between different European defence systems, including manned and unmanned platforms.[15] The aim is to strengthen the European pillar of NATO as German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius made clear; 'With projects across air, land, sea, and cyber domains, we will jointly increase our defence capabilities, thereby strengthening the European pillar within NATO'.[16]

Even before the ink was dry on the Trinity House Agreement, negotiations began on a more comprehensive bilateral treaty. This was delayed by the collapse of Chancellor Scholz's *Ampel* ('traffic light') coalition but were resumed with renewed vigour under the new government of Friedrich Merz. The Kensington House Treaty was signed on 17 July 2025 and was hailed by Prime Minister Starmer as 'the first of its kind', marking a milestone in bilateral relations. To underline the historical significance and emotive symbolism of the treaty, it was signed in the V&A Museum in London, named after Queen Victoria and her German husband, Prince Albert.[17] The Kensington Treaty was broad-ranging and covered six pillars of cooperation, including a formalised structure for regular political consultations and policy coordination. The treaty's centre of gravity, however, was clearly foreign, security and defence cooperation. It incorporated and extended the Trinity House Agreement and included a bilateral mutual defence clause.[18] The underlying strategic intent was clearly to strengthen the European pillar of NATO by formalising a closer bilateral relationship and thereby facilitating greater cooperation within the E3 format between Europe's three major powers: the UK, Germany and France.[19]

Reset with Europe: (2) France and the E3

In many respects, the UK and France are natural partners. Both are middle sized European states with permanent seats on the UN Security Council, their own nuclear deterrence and a more muscular strategic culture than most other European democracies. Since 1956, however, their grand strategies have diverged, with Paris drawing diametrically opposite conclusions than London from the Suez crisis and seeking to carve out an independent path for itself and Europe. If all British foreign policy since 1940 has been footnotes to Churchill, all French foreign policy since that time has been footnotes to General Charles de Gaulle. 'France', he famously declared, 'must act like a great power precisely because she no longer is one'.[20] He pulled France out of NATO's integrated military structure in 1966 and sought to position the country as the natural leader of Europe. He also vetoed Britain's first application to join the EEC in 1963, and its second in 1967.

Anglo-French relations improved considerably in the 1990s, primarily because of their shared experiences of the Yugoslav wars and the close military cooperation that developed them. This rapprochement led to the Franco-British St. Malo Declaration of December 1998, which paved the way for the development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).[21] The real milestone was signing of two treaties on security and defence cooperation in November 2010 which are collectively known as the Lancaster House Agreement.[22] This created an ambitious framework for deepening cooperation in conventional and nuclear defence. As part of a deepening of cooperation between the British and French armed forces, a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) was to be established as part of a broader effort to strengthen interoperability and compatibility in military doctrine, training and operations. It also involved the beginnings of cooperation in nuclear research and development.[23]

Unfortunately, the Lancaster House treaties fail to live up to their expectations. Anglo-French relations deteriorated sharply after Brexit and worsened after the AUKUS submarine agreement between the UK, Australia and the US. Putin's war and the return of Trump have given both sides, however, a strong incentive for seeking to reboot their bilateral cooperation. Shortly after taking up office, the new Labour Minister of Defence John Healey announced his intentions to 'refresh' the Lancaster House agreement.[24] This bore fruit in the 37th Anglo-French summit in London between Prime Minister Starmer and President Macron, held during the latter's state visit in July 2025—the first visit by a French President since 2008. Speaking to the British parliament, President Macron declared that the two nations 'will enter a new stage that will scale up' defence cooperation between them, in order to 'fully shoulder the responsibility when it comes to European security'.[25]

A raft of new agreements were signed during the state visit which have helped reboot the Lancaster House agreements. These include a new 'Entente Industrielle' to deepen defence-industrial cooperation, focusing on additional purchases of Storm Shadow cruise missiles and a commitment to develop a new generation of deep strike and anti-ship missiles. The CJEF is to be replaced by a Combined Joint Force able to command a combined Franco-British corps, with the aim of 'stepping up their leadership within NATO'. The 'Coalition of the Willing' was also given further form

and structure, in preparation of a possible ceasefire in Ukraine.[26] Of particular significance was the Northwood Declaration on nuclear cooperation, which created a 'UK-France Nuclear Steering Group' and declared that 'the respective deterrents of both countries are independent but can be co-ordinated, and that there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by both nations'.[27]

By the end of July 2025, therefore, the UK had refreshed and rebooted its bilateral defence and security cooperation with France, and signed a landmark bilateral treaty with Germany, the centrepiece of which was enhanced defence cooperation. With the revitalisation of Franco-German relationship under Chancellor Merz, all three sides of the triangle between the London, Paris and Berlin are now stronger than ever. As we have seen, the UK-German Trinity House agreement and the Kensington Treaty were explicitly intended to complement the Lancaster House agreement and lay 'the foundations for increasingly close co-operation between the E3'. Anglo-German defence cooperation was presented as 'a crucial element in the broader architecture of European security'; It is explicitly designed to support our Allies and strengthen the European contribution to NATO. In particular, it complements our respective existing bilateral agreements with France, laying the foundations for increasingly close co-operation between the E3.[28]

Reset with Europe: (3) The European Union

The UK Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has calculated that the economic cost of Brexit by 2030 will amount to minus 4% less GDP than it would otherwise have been, had the UK remained in the EU. At the same time, a think tank report shared with members of Starmer's Cabinet suggests that alignment with Brussels regulations could boost economic growth by between 1 and 2.2%.[29] It is of little surprise, therefore, that the Labour government is keen to 'turn a corner' on Brexit and develop closer trade and security relations with the EU. Whilst there is little stomach in the main UK parties for reopening the toxic debate on Brexit, the economic benefits to Britain of improving relations with the EU are undeniable. At the same time, there is mutual recognition by both sides that a closer and more cooperative UK-EU relationship is an important element of a hedging strategy against the vagaries of Trumpian foreign policy. Above all, developing a much more formalised and institutionalised UK-EU security and defence partnership is important in strengthening Europe's ability to provide for its own deterrence and defence.

On 3 February 2025, Prime Minister Starmer attended an informal meeting of the European Council where issues of European defence were discussed.[30] This meeting gave impetus to the negotiations between London and Brussels on a new treaty. The talks were imbued with a sense of urgency given the looming threat of tariffs from President Trump and his aggressive posturing over Greenland. The UK had three 'baskets' of issues (covering defence and security; immigration and transnational crime; and trade) and three 'red lines' (no to the Single Market, the Customs Union and the free movement of people).[31] The most contentious issues in the negotiations proved to be youth mobility and EU access to UK fishing waters. Fishing quotas proved a particularly thorny problem. Although the fishing industries in both the UK and the EU are relatively small, they have great emotional symbolism and are often linked to powerful lobby groups,

particularly in France and Spain. The French were particularly insistent that any future UK-EU defence pact should be linked to quotas on haddock, herring and cod. This French focus on fishing proved baffling to many member states in east and central European more preoccupied with the wars raging in Europe's East. Kaja Kallas, the EU High Representative, spoke for many when she commented that she was 'surprised at how important the fish are'.[32]

> *The real prize for both sides was undoubtedly the EU-UK Security and Defence Partnership.*

Happily, by May the fish problem had been resolved (by extending the current quota arrangements until 2038), as had other areas of contention such as youth mobility and professional qualifications. This cleared the way for the long-awaited UK-EU summit in London on 19 May 2025. This, Prime Minister Starmer declared, marked 'a new stage in our relations'.[33] The summit saw the signing of a new strategic partnership, along with revisions to the existing Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) which eased trade restrictions in areas like food exports and energy. Critics have, however, noted that many of the agreements were vague on specifics and suggested that the economic benefits of the new deal may prove modest.[34]

The real prize for both sides was undoubtedly the EU-UK Security and Defence Partnership. This is the centrepiece of the new relationship and is based on the shared conviction that the 'UK and the EU share a responsibility for the security of Europe' and that the 'security and prosperity of the UK and the EU are also closely interconnected and interdependent'.[35] The new partnership embraces a comprehensive range of concerns, from peacekeeping, crisis management operations and maritime security, to space, cyber security, and resilience of critical infrastructure. British and EU officials will now meet every six months to discuss defence and foreign policy issues, including support for Ukraine. The security partnership also paves the way for UK defence companies to participate in the EU's proposed new Security Action for Europe (SAFE) defence fund. 'This is the first step towards UK participation in Europe's defence initiatives', EU President von der Leyen noted; 'This security and defence partnership opens the door towards the joint procurement'.[36] She noted that a 'second step' would be required before British defence companies are able to compete for joint procurement projects. To this end, the UK-EU Common Understanding document committed both parties to 'swiftly explore any possibilities for mutually beneficial enhanced cooperation created by the SAFE instrument, once adopted, in accordance with their respective legal frameworks'.[37]

The new UK-EU strategic partnership on security and defence has been criticised for lacking detail and specific milestones, but it is an important step in rebuilding trust and cooperation between Britain and the EU after Brexit.[38] It established regular and formally institutionalised political consultations on a comprehensive range of security issues. It also opens the way to greater synergies and economies of scale in the European defence-industrial sector. As the EU Council President Antonio Costa noted, the summit agreements 'mark not just progress, but a new chapter in the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, the start of a renewed and strengthened strategic partnership'. The new defence cooperation agreements, he added, 'will strengthen

Europe's contribution to NATO and it will sharpen our focus on common strategic priorities on trade'.[39]

The UK, the Wider North and NATO's Eastern Flank

In the light of what Winston Churchill called the 'wonderful unconscious tradition of British foreign policy' to 'oppose the strongest, most aggressive, most dominating Power on the continent', it is no surprise that the focus of Britain's re-engagement with European security has been on the Wider North and NATO's eastern flank.[40] Britain's concerns about Putin's hegemonic ambitions in eastern Europe and the Baltic, and Russia's general hostility towards Europe and the wider rules-based international system, have deepened over the last decade. Anglo-Russian relations deteriorated sharply after the Salisbury nerve agent attack in 2018, and the UK has increasingly found itself at the forefront of Russian grey-zone aggression, with the Putin regime portraying the UK as Russia's 'main foreign policy opponent' and 'toughest opponent'.[41]

The 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) notes that the UK faces 'a generational challenge' that 'demands a generational response, and that 'Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a strategic inflection point'. The Review underlines that the UK government's approach is a 'NATO First' policy and that there is 'an unequivocal need for the UK to redouble its efforts within the Alliance and to step up its contribution to Euro-Atlantic security more broadly—particularly as Russian aggression across Europe grows and as the United States of America adapts its regional priorities'. Nonetheless, the Review notes, "NATO First' does not mean 'NATO only", and that the UK 'should take a 'pragmatic approach to bolstering collective security in the Euro-Atlantic through stronger bilateral and minilateral partnerships'.[42]

This passage succinctly encapsulates the British approach to the 'Wider North', which encompasses the North Atlantic, the Arctic and High North, and the Baltic Sea region—a broad swathe of territory along NATO's northern and eastern flanks.[43] The UK's security commitments are, first and foremost, embedded and institutionalised within the NATO alliance, but they are supplemented by a web of bilateral and minilateral partnerships. The UK has bilateral security and defence cooperation with a broad of countries in the Nordic-Baltic region and eastern Europe, many of which it is revitalising and deepening. In 2010, the UK initiated the *Northern Group* as a forum for discussion and coordination on security and defence policy. Membership includes the Nordic and Baltic countries, along with Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK. More consequentially, the UK is the lead nation for the *Joint Expeditionary Force* (JEF), which currently includes the Nordic and Baltic countries, along with the Netherlands.

> *The UK sees itself as having a particular responsibility for maritime security in this region.*

Britain's engagement with the Wider North begins in the North Atlantic. As an island nation and one of Europe's leading naval powers, the UK sees itself as having a particular responsibility for maritime security in this region—both in terms of safeguarding freedom of navigation in the Arctic and High North, and in terms of the strategic defence of the 'Greenland-Iceland-UK' (GIUK) gap from Russia's Northern Fleet.[44] The strategic significance of the North Atlantic also

explains the close defence partnership with Norway, the UK's most important Nordic ally. British Royal Marine Commandos train annually in Norway and are integrated into Norwegian defence planning. In 2023, the UK opened a new military base in Norway, known appropriately as 'Camp Viking'. The two navies have also a long history of cooperation. Most recently, Norway deployed a frigate to participate in the Carrier Strike Group (CSG25) deployment to the Indo-Pacific. The two countries currently cooperate on developing new technologies for the protection of critical underseas infrastructure. In February 2025, defence cooperation with Norway was given a 'kickstart' with the signing of a new defence agreement, which will be followed by a more ambitious strategic partnership later in the year.[45] 'Kicking-starting work on a deep, ambitious new defence agreement with Norway', Defence Secretary John Healey noted, 'shows the UK promise to step up on European security in action'.[46]

Established in 2014 at the NATO Wales summit, the JEF is one of the primary expressions of the UK's commitment to deterrence and defence in northeastern Europe. Known affectionately in British military circles as the club of 'beer-drinking nations of the North', it is an exemplar of practical and pragmatic European defence cooperation.[47] Led by a two star deployable Standing Joint Headquarters (SJFGQ) in Northwood, it is a flexible force which members can choose to 'opt into', and one that is able to respond rapidly to crises in a coordinated manner. 'The JEF can act while NATO is thinking', as one Royal Navy commodore argued; it is a 'force of friends, filling a hole in the security architecture of northern Europe between a national force and a NATO force'.[48] It therefore constitutes a 'test bed' for more innovative forms of European security and defence cooperation that can respond nimbly to a broad range of crises where NATO as a whole is not involved. It is particularly suitable for responding to grey-zone aggression and hybrid attacks at the 'sub-strategic threshold of competition'. It is also designed with multi-domain operations in mind, with a 'balanced range of capabilities and capacities within the principal environments of Maritime, Land, Air, Space and Cyber, which could then be tailored to a specific deployment or mission'.[49] The UK is able deploy many of the ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance assets) assets that otherwise only NATO or the USA has, which means the JEF can help fill the 'ISR gap' in European operations in the Baltic Sea region.[50]

The JEF is already beginning to demonstrate its potential as a minilateral framework for flexible and pragmatic European defence cooperation.[51] In November 2023, JEF defence ministers activated the Joint Response Option for the first time following a spate of attacks on underseas pipelines and cables. This saw Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, and the United Kingdom deploy patrol vessels, frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, helicopters and minesweepers to increase protection of critical underwater infrastructure., Following the deliberate damage of the Estlink2 undersea cable between Estonia and Finland in January 2025, the JEF activated 'Nordic Warden'. Nordic Warden is a UK-led and AI-based reaction system located in JEF's operational HQ in Northwood that coordinates data from sensor systems operating from warships, aircraft and other platforms. It is designed to track movements of Russia's shadow fleet and assess threats to underseas infrastructure, allowing appropriate action to be taken.[52] In both cases, it is important to note that the JEF did not actually take command of

national military assets; rather, the JEF HQ provided ISR capabilities for the coordination and coherence of individual national operations.

In this way, the JEF can serve as 'test bed' for different forms of European defence cooperation and provide one of the building-blocks of a more European NATO. It is increasingly focused on the High North and the Baltics, demonstrating the importance of the Wider North to the UK. It is thus a prime exemplar of the 'small, military co-operative institutions that exist at the *interstices* between the national level and multilateral institutions, foremost NATO and the EU'; these 'interstitial' forms of cooperation 'provide contingency in the guise of institutional 'work-arounds' to deal with both the limits of national defence provision and the complexities of getting agreement within what are now a very large NATO and EU'.[53] They therefore hit the sweet spot between ad hoc 'coalitions of the willing' and multilateral security institutions.

> *Whilst the defence budget has risen, the 'hollowing out' of the armed forces after decades of underinvestment and underfunding will take many years to overcome.*

The UK's main permanent commitment to the security of northeastern Europe is its lead role in NATO's Forward Land Force (FLF) battlegroup based in Tapa, Estonia (referred to by the British Army as *Operation Cabrit*). Established in 2016, this is now the British Army's largest overseas military deployment. The RAF has also contributed to NATO Baltic Air Policing Mission with Eurofighter Typhoons based at Ämari. The British FLF deployment initially consisted of a reinforced armoured battalion drawn from the 12 Armoured Brigade Combat Team. From October 2024 this was replaced by a light infantry battalion equipped with wheeled vehicles drawn from the 4th Light Brigade (4 Lt Bde, also known as the 'Black Rats'), with the rest of the brigade being held at a state of high readiness ready for rapid deployment to Estonia. Equipment will be pre-positioned in Estonia to facilitate rapid transition from battalion to brigade size.[54] This downgrading of the UK's military footprint in Estonia reflects the relatively small size of the contemporary British Army and the challenges of modernization. Britain's armoured forces are concentrated in the 3 (UK) Division, which is currently being re-equipped with Boxer armoured personnel carriers, Ajax reconnaissance vehicles and Challenger 3 tanks. UK armoured forces are not able to deploy to Estonia at the same time as undertaking modernization. The FLF in Estonia will therefore rely on tanks, mechanized infantry and engineers provided by France and Denmark.[55] This demonstrates one of the problems facing the UK's commitment to European security and defence, which is the financial constraints under which the British military has long been operating. Whilst the defence budget has risen, the 'hollowing out' of the armed forces after decades of underinvestment and underfunding will take many years to overcome.

Global Britain: AUKUS and the Commonwealth

Britain is an island nation and maritime trading power with global economic, political and diplomatic interests. Whilst British security policy is now primarily focused on the Euro-Atlantic area, and although London has quietly dropped the post-Brexit

rhetoric of 'Global Britain', the UK still seeks to play a global role and cultivate relations with partners and allies beyond Europe. In Churchill's day, the 'three circles' of British foreign policy were Europe, America and the Commonwealth; today, they are Europe, America and the Indo-Pacific.

The UK's interests in the Indo-Pacific are economic, political, diplomatic and strategic. Britain is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and as such, it has an obligation to safeguard 'international peace and security'. As a maritime trading nation with global economic interests (in terms of supply chains, markets and critical raw materials), the UK favours a rules-based international order including freedom of navigation and security of maritime trading routes. Approximately 17% of UK trade is with the Indo-Pacific region. Britain's primary security and defence partnerships in the region are with Australia and Japan; both are underpinned by major defence-industrial projects: AUKUS and GCAP (Global Combat Aircraft Programme, a trilateral partnership between the UK, Japan and Italy to develop a next generation fighter jet).

The UK is increasingly aware of the deepening linkages between security in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.

The UK has deep historical and cultural ties with Australia and New Zealand through the Commonwealth and through the Five Eyes (FVEY) Anglosphere signals intelligence alliance, which also includes Canada and the United States. Australia, the UK and the United States also cooperate in the AUKUS security partnership designed to 'promote a free and open Indo-Pacific that is secure and stable'.[56] Reflecting its character as a culturally diverse and multi-ethnic country, the UK has close relations with India and Pakistan, both of which are Commonwealth nations. Finally, like many other European countries, the UK is increasingly aware of the deepening linkages between security in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. Russia and China's 'no limits partnership' as well as North Korea's escalating military involvement in Ukraine demonstrate the interdependence of the two regions in the current global context.

The current direction of post-Brexit security and defence policy is illustrated by *Operation Highmast*, the eight-month deployment of Carrier Strike Group (CSG) to the Indo-Pacific in April 2025. Carrier Strike Group *CSG25* is the Royal Navy's largest maritime deployment and is built around HMS Prince of Wales, one of Britain's two aircraft carriers. It follows a similar deployment by HMS Queen Elizabeth in 2021-22. As noted above, Norway has committed a frigate to the entirety of the deployment, and contributions will also come from Spain, Canada and New Zealand—but not the US Navy. *Operation Highmast* will include cooperation with US strike groups in a major exercise with Japan in the Northern Philippine Sea, but the US Navy is not part of the CSG.[57] CGS25 therefore underlines the RN's ability to operate globally with allies and partners—if needs be, independently of the US and NATO. This is potentially significant as the UK seeks to build cooperation in the Wider North with countries such as Norway and Canada with a view to confronting Russia's Northern Fleet in the GIUK gap.

Operation Highmast included the participation of CGS25 in Australia's premier multilateral defence exercise *Talisman Sabre* (13 July-4 August) and joint exercises with

the Indian Navy, ending in a port visit to Mumbai. It therefore serves a raft of political and strategic purposes that are important in the context of the uncertainties surrounding contemporary US foreign policy. It demonstrated the global reach of the Royal Navy operating in partnership with non-US NATO allies and contributed to cementing strategic partnerships with Japan and Australia.[58] In doing so, it shows the capabilities and resolve of middle-sized powers acting autonomously from the United States. It reinforces their own sense of agency in a competitive and uncertain world and makes them more attractive partners for the USA.[59] It also a clear indication of an autonomous European commitment to a secure rules-based maritime order.

Conclusion

'Catastrophes', Victor Hugo remarked, 'have a sombre way of sorting things out'. Since Brexit, the UK has been searching for a new foreign policy identity and a clear set of foreign and security policy roles for itself. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has provided the 'strategic inflexion point' which has crystalised a new role for the UK—as a leading actor in NATO with a particular responsibility for the Wider North and NATO's eastern flank. Trump's 'America First' foreign policy has also focused British minds on the need to strengthen the European pillar of NATO and Europe's ability to defend itself, independently of the US if necessary.

As the 2025 *Strategic Defence Review* notes, "NATO First' does not mean 'NATO only". Britain, it argues, 'should take a 'pragmatic approach to bolstering collective security in the Euro-Atlantic through stronger bilateral and minilateral partnerships.' The UK has long cultivated a network of bi- and minilateral forms of interstitial defence cooperation, but after Brexit and with the uncertainties of Trump's commitment to NATO, these have grown in importance—and are likely to continue to do so. NATO and the EU constitute the twin pillars of the Euro-Atlantic community: NATO provides collective deterrence capabilities (nuclear and conventional), high-end C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance), integrated defence planning and interoperability; the EU offers diplomatic and economic clout, provides the framework for defence-industrial synergies and contributes to societal resilience, civil preparedness and military mobility. However, both organisations are now large, bureaucratic and ponderous in decision-making, reflecting the diverse geopolitical interests of their members. Minilateral interstitial cooperation on the other hand, undergirded by a web of bilateral agreements, promises flexibility, adaptability and dynamism. These forms of cooperation bring together smaller groups of like-minded countries and therefore tend to be swifter in decision-making and action—able to 'act whilst NATO is thinking' (as has been said of the JEF).

> *In terms of its armed forces, Britain's real strength and value added for Europe is the Royal Navy.*

The UK has much to offer in terms of European defence and deterrence. It has the fifth largest economy globally and is the second largest defence spender within NATO; it has a substantial defence-industrial sector with a track-record of research and innovation in cutting-edge military technologies;[60] it has a well-regarded national security and intelligence service apparatus, including GCHQ,

linked to the Five Eyes intelligence alliance; it has its own nuclear deterrence and capabilities across all five domains, including space and cyber security; it also has a professional diplomatic service, links with the Commonwealth of 54 members and significant reserves of soft power. In terms of its armed forces, Britain's real strength and value added for Europe is the Royal Navy, its 'Senior Service'. The British Army is highly professional, well trained and with growing lethality—but it is now the smallest it has been since the Napoleonic wars. The Royal Air Force is a real asset, but European NATO countries are not short of airpower. Britain's most important contribution to European security is therefore its naval power; the RN can make a significant contribution to maritime security across the Wider North, from maritime presence and surveillance to littoral power projection, protection of critical underwater infrastructure and anti-submarine operations.[61]

There are three key determinants of a country's ability to lead in defence and security policy: its operational capacity (in terms of military assets, personnel, equipment, C4ISR capabilities, logistics, etc.); military-strategic culture (a willingness to lead and an understanding of the strengths and limits of military force); and an appropriate level of defence expenditure. The UK has great strengths in terms of the first two, i.e., operational capacity and military-strategic culture. The main problem it faces, however, is amount it spends on defence given its political and strategic aspirations. UK foreign and security policy has frequently characterised by the triumph of ambition over affordability. Britain aspires to play a leading role in deterrence and defence in the Euro-Atlantic area, whilst continuing to have a presence in the Indo-Pacific region and a broader global role. The 2025 *Strategic Defence Review* provides some welcome guidelines for Britain's future strategic orientation, but effective strategy depends on a balance between ends, means and ways. At present, there is a mismatch between strategic ends and financial means.

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