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Reclaiming the Waves:

A Maritime-First Defence Strategy for Britain's National Interests



Joshua C. Huminski

Foreword by Field Marshal The Lord Richards of Herstmonceux GCB CBE DSO DL



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Endorsements



"Joshua Huminski's pragmatic paper is essential reading at a time of growing global uncertainty and British fiscal conundrums. In the context of continued Russian aggression in Ukraine and its destabilising sub-threshold operations in Europe, plus the increasingly 'transactional symbiosis' between Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, Joshua's superb analysis of geopolitical realities and astute recommendations fill a gap in the recent Strategic Defence Review's hedging.

"Moreover, with US distraction away from Europe and a generational shift in our key ally's priorities, his articulation of a neo-Corbettian maritime strategy, from the seabed to space, would allow London to finally balance its ends, ways, and means to generate a coherent force structure to meet the security challenges of the next decade, and offer a more focused and meaningful contribution to NATO's collective defence. It would also underline the UK's leadership of the Joint Expeditionary Force of like-minded nations.

"I echo Lord Richards' reflection that the author's prescient prognosis and practical proposals would avoid the UK spreading itself too thinly in every domain and allow it to regain credibility with allies and adversaries alike."

—Rear Admiral (Rtd) Tim Woods CBE, Defence Attaché to Kyiv (2019-2022), Head of the British Defence Staff USA (2023-2026)

"*Reclaiming the Waves* is a novel attempt to fill a crucial gap in the current Whitehall defence dialogue in our changing geostrategic and geoeconomic environment. Trying to do everything everywhere risks doing it all badly. We should rather make difficult choices and focus our Armed Forces on a clear strategy and the ruthless pursuit of national interest.

"The author offers a perspective by drawing from the United Kingdom's storied maritime past to outline a solution for the country's future, leveraging our island's strategic geography and a clarity of modern purpose for the military instrument.

"While it may not be the complete answer, the author articulates a compelling case underpinned by well-considered strategic logic, around which our evolving Armed Forces can be designed and integrated.

"I join with Lord Richards in commending Joshua for offering this well considered challenge and seeking to both inform and catalyse the debate."

—Lt Gen. (Rtd) Sir Charles Stickland KCB OBE, UK Chief of Joint Operations (2021-2024)

"We look back on our maritime history with pride. The Royal Navy often defined the moral mission of the nation, whether that was helping to end the slave trade or retake the Falklands. But we rarely ask what the fleet's moral mission is today. Keeping trade and data flowing with a shadow fleet for more than 1000 vessels, attacks on navigation systems and underwater cables, AI enabled cargo

fraud, and a crisis in border control requires relevant and resilient capabilities. This timely paper reminds us of our duty."

—The Rt Hon. Dame Penny Mordaunt

"Dominating the waters around our islands is a must for any government serious about national security. This paper helps to outline some of the trade-offs that will involve, and calls on Britain to make the investments necessary for our defence."

—Danny Kruger MP, Head of Preparing for Government, Reform UK

"With Britain struggling to get to even 3 per cent of GDP on defence spending, and its forces overstretched, Joshua Huminski has produced an insightful and bold paper mapping out a clear plan for a new approach rooted in realism about what can be done within cost constraints."

"The focus, he says, should be on the Euro-Atlantic and a maritime posture designed to make Britain more secure, credible, and useful to its allies. This is a maritime-first strategy for a British-first policy."

"When so much of the policy discussion in Britain on these themes takes place in a climate of denial, where difficult choices are avoided year after year by politicians, and the temptation is to continually over-commit and under-deliver, it is refreshing to see an American friend of the United Kingdom calmly and coolly explain the trade-offs and then propose serious solutions."

"Everyone who cares about the future of Britain's defences, and who wants the country to play a leading role in alliance endeavours, should read this paper."

—Iain Martin, Director and Founder of the London Defence Conference

About the author



Joshua C. Huminski is the Senior Vice President for National Security and Intelligence at the Center for the Study of the Presidency & Congress (CSPC). A specialist in Euro-Atlantic and trans-Atlantic relations, NATO defence, and U.S. national security policy, he oversees the Center's defence and security programming.

His analysis frequently appears in American publications such as *The Hill*, *Breaking Defense*, and the *Diplomatic Courier* and European publications such as *Engelsberg Ideas*. He has also been published by the Modern War Institute, the Baltic Defence College, ICDS, and the London-based Council on Geostrategy. He has appeared on NewsNation, TalkTV News, TVP World, Times Radio, and other U.S. and European media outlets.

Huminski's first book *Continental Drift* on European defence policy during the Trump presidency is scheduled for publication by Hurst in spring 2027. He is a senior fellow at George Mason University's National Security Institute and a non-resident fellow with the Irregular Warfare Initiative. He is also an International Fellow with the London-based Council on Geostrategy.

Originally from Connecticut, he received his graduate degree (with Merit) in War Studies from King's College London and his undergraduate honours degree from the University of Connecticut.

In his free time, he is a voracious reader and reviewer, the host of the literary podcast 'Coffee and Conflict', a keen traveller, and an avid Formula One fan. He can be found on X (formerly Twitter) @joshuachuminski.

Glossary



AD: Air defence

ASW: Anti-submarine warfare

AUKUS: Australia–United Kingdom–United States security partnership

CAS-D: Continuous At-Sea Deterrent

CUAS: Counter-uncrewed aircraft systems

DCA: Dual-capable aircraft

DCP: Defence Command Paper

DDA: Defence and deterrence of the Euro-Atlantic Area

DIB: Defence industrial base

DIME: Diplomacy, information, military, and economics

DIP: Defence Investment Plan

FPV: First-person view

GCAP: Global Combat Air Programme

GIUK gap: Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom gap

HMG: His Majesty's Government

IAMDS: Integrated air and missile defence system

ISR-T: Intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting

JEF: Joint Expeditionary Force

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NDIP: New Defence Investment Plan

NEO: Non-combatant evacuation operation

OODA: Observe, orient, decide, act

PNT: Position, navigation, and timing

SDR: Strategic Defence Review

SLOC: Sea line of communication

Foreword



For any country's armed forces to be successful, a clear strategy is necessary—one that links ways and means with defined ends appropriate to the geostrategic environment and adversary threat. Successive British governments have, however, placed overreaching ends ahead of our country's increasingly limited means that are disconnected from the state of the world.

Consequently, the men and women in uniform have been asked to do too much with too little. While they have soldiered on valiantly, despite these circumstances performing their duties with honour and dignity, the United Kingdom's credibility in the eyes of our allies and, just as importantly, our adversaries, has weakened. Our defence debates have narrowed, focusing not on strategic vision or desired capabilities, but on individual weapons programmes and legacy systems. Such short-sightedness is no longer sustainable for the changing geostrategic landscape in which Britain finds herself.

America is increasingly looking towards its home shores and onward to the Indo-Pacific. The European pillar of NATO is strengthening, and the European Union is looking to assume a greater role in defence affairs. Russia is rearming while it prosecutes its conflict in Ukraine and will continue to present a threat towards NATO and the European continent both conventionally and, more immediately, through its campaign of hybrid warfare. The Middle East remains unsettled and will require continued engagement and attention. China's ambitions in Asia are hegemonic in nature, combining commercial, political, legal, and military tools to pursue its aims.

While His Majesty's Government has interests in each of these theatres, the means of this Government under present political and fiscal conditions do not enable it to adequately pursue or deliver desired outcomes in all domains, at all times.

Britain is overstretched.

To successfully defend the realm and to advance British interests globally, a new conceptual framework for our Armed Forces is necessary, one that aligns our present capabilities with both the emerging geopolitical landscape and our limited means. This paper offers such a vision—one that returns the United Kingdom to its maritime focus, but also outlines a path towards delivering meaningful effects and influence on the European continent and further afield while advancing British interests first.

In returning to Sir Julian Corbett's maritime strategy, the author provides a reconceptualisation of how London can influence events, advance its broader political and economic objectives, and regain credibility with allies and adversaries alike. Yet, more than simply rehashing old concepts for a new era, it offers a forward-looking, ambitious vision that will have effects well beyond the defence arena, serving to stimulate industry, encourage innovation, and strengthen British competitiveness, all of which are needed now more than ever.

At the very least, this paper offers a starting point for a long-overdue and much delayed discussion on what Britain's Armed Forces are for and what Britain's way of war should become.

I look forward to the discussion that I hope will follow this paper's publication and commend the author for helping to advance this vital conversation.

Field Marshal The Lord Richards of Herstmonceux GCB CBE DSO DL
Former Chief of the Defence Staff, British Armed Forces (2009–2013)

Executive summary



Successive British governments have fallen short in their primary responsibility when it comes to defence strategy: identifying and defining core national interests and developing a realistic, viable, and clear defence vision for the United Kingdom in turn. The consequence has been an inability to establish priorities and accept necessary trade-offs, resulting in an **increasingly overstretched and hollow Armed Forces**. With its resources profoundly mismatched to its ambitions, Britain has begun to lose credibility with both its allies and adversaries. In an increasingly fraught geostrategic context, this status quo cannot continue.

Whilst existing defence concepts such as the 2025 Strategic Defence Review get important things correct, they suffer critical shortcomings: failing to articulate a distinctly British way of war; hedging instead of making decisive choices; placing organisation before strategy; affirming NATO-first yet failing to constrain non-NATO commitments; unrealistic global ambitions amidst limited capacity; and an overall risk of overreach.

To reverse this absent strategic clarity, **this paper proposes a reenvisioned maritime-first defence strategy in order to serve the British national interest, through 2035.**

It begins with the fundamental yet neglected question: *what are the British Armed Forces for?* Their purposes are defined as:

- Defend the United Kingdom and preserve the integrity of the British state.
- Deter, prevent, and, if necessary, defeat threats to Britain and its vital interests.
- Lead in NATO collective defence and deterrence, and secure the Euro-Atlantic.
- Pursue and advance British interests abroad through selective, sustainable engagement.

In view of these ends, this paper proposes as **a modernised adaptation of the maritime strategy of Sir Julian Corbett outlined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.** This strategy recognises and harnesses Britain's unique island geography. Its main principles will be:

- **Securing communications** including the sea, seabed, air, space, and cyberspace.
- Pursuing **limited coalition war** over unilateral engagement.
- **Projecting power from the maritime domain**, securing home waters through air and space power, air defence, and long-range and deep precision strike.
- **Offshore engagement** in collaboration with the European pillar of NATO, providing a meaningful but limited land component to the greater land mass of continental allies.

These principles would then translate into specific mission tasks to enable the Armed Forces to fulfil their purpose.

This strategy is one adequate to the changing strategic context in which Britain finds itself both at home and abroad as it approaches the middle of the twenty-first century.

Globally, the paper assumes that **Russia will remain the principal threat** to Britain and Europe and that **the United States will continue shifting attention to the Indo-Pacific**, requiring European NATO partners to shoulder more of the alliance's conventional burden. **Chinese ambition and Middle Eastern instability will be the rules, not the exceptions**, and technological change will continue developing rapidly in timelines of weeks and months rather than years. At home, **Britain will continue to operate with constrained resources**. In view of this, Britain should focus its attentions on the homeland and its approaches in the North Atlantic, GIUK Gap, High North, North Sea, and Baltic approaches, as well as on the territory of North European allies.

This strategy will necessarily shape force design, which will give greater emphasis to the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force and their relevant equipment needs. The nuclear deterrent will remain central, reinforced by conventional, cyber, and resilience capabilities. The British Army will become smaller as a result, but ultimately become more credible and more capable, shaped into a single well-resourced, sustainable division as Britain's land contribution to NATO. Crewed platforms should be combined with autonomous systems as part of a broader digital targeting and communications network, and conventional, but increasingly smart, mass, stockpiles, and logistics maintained.

Trade-offs will be necessary in this renewed strategy. Britain should not pursue a large standing army, sustain a routine hard-power in the Indo-Pacific, or attempt open-ended stabilisation or counterinsurgency abroad. Beyond the Euro-Atlantic, any activity should be highly selective and directly in the national interest. Pursuing this strategy will require deeper munitions stocks, reignited industrial capacity including always-on production lines, and broad public consent.

Main recommendations

- **Adopt a Britain-first, maritime-first strategy through 2035**, prioritising homeland defence and Euro-Atlantic security.
- **Build a joint maritime force** focused on anti-submarine warfare, air and missile defence, ISR-T, undersea awareness, resilient command-and-control, and long-range strike.
- **Protect critical infrastructure and communications** across the maritime, seabed, air, space, cyber, data, and PNT domains, while maintaining CAS-D and credible conventional deterrence.
- **Fully resource one high-readiness Army division** as Britain's sustainable conventional contribution to NATO.
- Reduce routine Indo-Pacific hard-power commitments and avoid force structures designed for open-ended stabilisation, reconstruction, or counterinsurgency.
- Publish a **New Defence Investment Plan** linking spending to mission tasks; expand munitions, logistics, repair, reserves, and industrial surge capacity; and secure political, allied, and public support for the strategy and its trade-offs.

Introduction



Main points

- Successive governments have failed to align the United Kingdom's defence ambitions with its resources, leaving the Armed Forces overstretched and strategically unfocused.
- Britain needs a clear defence concept rooted in national interests rather than a force designed to cover every theatre, domain, and capability.
- The United Kingdom should pursue a Britain-first, maritime-first strategy based on a modern interpretation of Sir Julian Corbett's late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century strategy, with Euro-Atlantic primacy and selective offshore engagement through 2035.

In the late spring and early summer of 2026, the United Kingdom experienced a defence-driven change in government. While not wholly due to the politics of defence, it was certainly one of the last straws in the prime ministership of Labour's Sir Keir Starmer. In June of this year, the Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey, and Al Carns, the Minister for the Armed Forces resigned over the inability (and seeming unwillingness) of the Government to publish the promised Defence Investment Plan (DIP). The DIP was the fiscal explanation of how the Government would meet the strategic priorities outlined in its 2025 Strategic Defence Review. A breakdown between the Ministry of Defence, headed by Healey, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves over how much defence spending the United Kingdom could afford led to the policy impasse, with the former asking for more than the latter would approve—a consistent theme in recent defence reviews.

The failure to publish the plan shook the confidence of Britain's allies in NATO and further afield. **As NATO prepared for the Ankara Summit, which took place in the beginning of July 2026, member states looked on with alarm as one of the alliance's most important partners was beset by political paralysis.** The publication of the DIP did not inspire greater confidence as the ambitions of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) were left only partially funded. Politically, Healey would return to government as Chancellor of the Exchequer under the premiership of the former Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, with Wes Streeting becoming the Minister of Defence. Burnham appeared no more willing than Starmer to grasp the defence nettle, but the challenges facing defence were and indeed are more systemic than narrowly partisan.

Indeed, this latest defence crisis reflected a deeper, more fundamental challenge: **existing British defence thinking is poorly matched to the United Kingdom's resource limits, force-generation realities, and Britain's actual comparative advantages, both present and future.**

To be clear, this approach is failing the Armed Forces and the British public. **Successive governments have fallen short in their core responsibility: identifying and defining core national interests and developing a realistic, viable, and clear defence vision for the United Kingdom in turn.** Consequently, governments have tended to itemise a near endless list of global priorities while singularly failing to make choices from those priorities. The United Kingdom, as a

result, sought to develop a multi-domain force possessing capabilities for all theatres, spreading increasingly scarce resources across the services, while often simultaneously attempting to find economy at the expense of the Armed Forces and national defence. As a result, the United Kingdom's Armed Forces are increasingly stretched and hollowed out, risking the loss of military credibility with allies and adversaries alike.

This paper attempts to fill that vacuum by offering a coherent defence concept that translates national political priorities into purposefully targeted defence effects that can ultimately inform force design. **Its central thesis is that the United Kingdom should adopt a strategic concept centred on a modern reinterpretation of Sir Julian Corbett's late nineteenth and early twentieth-century maritime strategy—one that is maritime-first, built around offshore engagement, Euro-Atlantic primacy, and explicitly accepts the limitations of British power, interests, and indeed resources.** The force that results from this strategic approach would become more coherent, more capable, and better integrated with a clear focus, blending a balanced mixture of new and conventional technology capabilities. **This maritime-oriented integrated force would better serve the interests of the British people, enable His Majesty's Government to meet London's alliance commitments, and see the United Kingdom become a more credible partner and ally.** Most importantly, it would align with a realistic appraisal of British national interests, which must reside at the heart of any credible defence strategy.

This paper is largely conceptual and meant to serve as the starting point of a vital discussion. It is not an operational plan or a line-by-line accounting of British defence spending. **The focus on programmes and systems has often become a stand-in for much-needed serious debates about the core of British national and defence interests. These debates are red herrings.** Whether the United Kingdom should adopt this system or that vehicle, while important, is ultimately a hollow discussion if there is no clear direction in which defence should go. More worryingly, the present discussion on the future of defence appears headed in a narrow, technology-focused direction, one which omits these broader strategic questions. While Carns is not entirely wrong when he asks "What are we doing in the UK? We are buying more tanks ... When a £400 drone destroys a £4 million tank, it's time to order more drones", his answer is also not entirely correct.¹ It is ultimately not an either-or proposition; rather it is about the balance of new technology and conventional weaponry suitable for Britain's approach to war.

The paper focuses on the period through 2035. It is in this time that the main adversary of the United Kingdom and NATO, the Russian Federation, is expected to regenerate, redevelop, and reform its conventional land forces and, consequently, present a material challenge to NATO. Some argue that the conventional threat from Russia could materialise sooner. While the author is sceptical of these arguments, Russia is embarking on a more aggressive and risk-tolerant campaign of hybrid or sub-threshold activities.

Moreover, the conventional, worst-case scenario is what will drive present allied discussions—both political and military. It is also over this period that NATO members are expected to increase defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP (3.5 per cent on core defence spending and 1.5 per cent

| 1 Dominic Lawson, "The Ministry of Defence is not fit for psomurpose," *The Times*, June 21, 2026. ([link](#))

on security and resilience).² There are significant systemic political and fiscal headwinds that will challenge the ability of all member states to reach this target, but it nonetheless demarcates a period of rising, not falling spending—a distinct change from the preceding decade.

This paper is structured in five chapters, along with this introduction and a conclusion. Chapter one outlines the strategic context and British defence interests as defined by the author, but informed by existing literature, through 2035. Chapter two offers a diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses, of the most recent Strategic Defence Review. Chapter three then outlines what a neo-Corbettian framework for a Britain First defence strategy looks like conceptually. Chapter four then takes this concept and translates into political objectives, defence priorities, and desired operational effects. This offers a logical flow that articulates what defence is for, the tasks of the Armed Forces in meeting these political objectives, and what operational effects are necessary to execute these tasks. Chapter five then aligns this concept with broader British first national interests: what does this mean for the British public? An accompanying annex offers a brief implementation plan as to how a new government could go about enacting the strategy discussed in this document.

This is also a ‘clean sheet’ approach to the United Kingdom’s defence strategy. Whilst it draws from and is informed by recent history, it is not an evolutionary approach that builds upon existing policy. The strength in such an approach is that it allows consideration of key strategic questions and dilemmas without being beholden to parliamentary or ministerial politics. The author recognises the importance of those politics but feels that the benefits of excluding them from this conversation outweigh the costs. More than anything else, the author hopes that this paper serves as a meaningful contribution to the ongoing discussion about the present and future of British defence.

² At the Hague Summit, the member states agreed to raise the floor on defence spending from 2 per cent of GDP (made at the 2014 Wales Summit) to 5 per cent; this will include 3.5 per cent of GDP on core military spending and an additional 1.5 per cent which will include non-core spending such as aid to Ukraine.

1. Strategic context and British defence interests through to 2035



Main points

- Russia will remain Britain's primary security threat, while China, Middle Eastern instability, technological change, and America's Indo-Pacific shift will shape the wider strategic environment.
- Britain's core interests lie in defending the realm, sustaining NATO and the Euro-Atlantic, protecting overseas territories and sea lines of communication, and retaining its nuclear deterrent.
- Because Britain will remain resource-constrained, its defence strategy must make explicit choices and concentrate power where British geography and capabilities offer the greatest advantage.

This chapter establishes two things:

1. The assumptions about the external environment in which His Majesty's Government will develop and execute the country's defence strategy.
2. The British national interests on which the defence strategy is built.

This assessment is partially informed by the Ministry of Defence's *Global Strategic Trends Out to 2055* published in 2024.³

External environment

- **Russia will remain the primary threat actor on the European continent and the most immediate challenge to British national security and defence, and interests in Europe.** Russia will, however, remain conventionally deterred by Article Five given alliance cohesion, and investments in defence and deterrence. Moscow will, nonetheless, seek to challenge alliance cohesion, undermine domestic politics, and carry out 'subthreshold' or 'hybrid' warfare and coercive nuclear signalling in pursuit of its strategic aims.
- **The conflict in Ukraine will have militarily stabilised but remain politically unresolved.** A line of control and cease-fire may exist, but a formal and lasting peace will remain elusive. **It will be akin to the state of non-war on the Korean peninsula.** Ukraine will be on the path to European Union membership but will not become a formal member. It will, for the foreseeable future, not be a part of NATO. This frozen conflict will experience periods of provocation and flare-ups.
- **The People's Republic of China will remain primarily a regional threat actor (in and from the Indo-Pacific) but retain the capacity to affect national and economic security on**

| 3 *Global Strategic Trends Out to 2055* (London: UK Ministry of Defence). ([link](#))

the continent of Europe and within the United Kingdom. This will occur directly using its national power to pursue interests in the United Kingdom and across Europe, and indirectly through its relationship with Russia. While it is unlikely that Beijing will seek to take the Republic of China (Taiwan) by military means, it remains a possibility over the period and will inform American defence strategy.

- **The interconnections between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific theatres of operation, and indeed conflict, will continue and deepen over the period covered.** The People's Republic of China's support for Russia in its 'special military operation', the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's provision of military personnel, and the military and intelligence support provided to Iran are all illustrative of these connections.
- **Instability in the Middle East will remain the rule not the exception.** While the United States and Israel have militarily weakened the Islamic Republic of Iran, it will retain capacity to project disruptive power in the Gulf—directly and via its proxies—and threaten British interests and allies in the region. The conflict over Israel and the Palestinian people will remain unresolved. **British national interests in this region are centred on stability and open sea lines of communication** to, from, and through the region's waterways and the **uninterrupted export of energy supplies** to the international and European markets.
- **The high point of American engagement and presence in Europe is now past. The rebalancing of American military forces and defence attention from Europe and NATO toward the Indo-Pacific will continue regardless of the occupant of the Oval Office.** This process pre-dated President Donald Trump (beginning under President Barack Obama in 2011) and will continue beyond his term in office. While the tone, speed, and scope will likely change, the overall trend is clear and one on which the United Kingdom should base its assumptions. **The United States will have developed a new 'transatlantic bargain' as part of NATO 3.0,** where Washington provides the strategic deterrence and some conventional capabilities, but the European pillar is expected to, and will become, responsible for conventional defence and deterrence.
- **Democratic stability will continue on the continent of Europe i.e., inter-state violence between members of NATO, the European Union, and non-aligned states will not occur over the period covered in this paper.** Democratic systems within Europe will persist but will experience pressure and internal system strain that will affect the ability of states to meet defence expenditure commitments.
- **The European pillar within NATO will assume greater importance and take on an increasingly primary role in alliance plans over the period covered in this strategy.** While there are significant unknowns, including, for example, the ability of countries such as Germany (which aims to have 360,000 troops by 2039) to meet stated ambitions and spending targets (including the 5 per cent of GDP spending agreed to at the Hague NATO Summit in 2025), it will nonetheless assume an increasing portion of the burden for European defence. **Even in the event of a ceasefire or peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine, the overall trajectory of defence expenditure is upward.** The possibility of a cessation of hostilities may weaken popular support for increased spending but nonetheless marks a different period than the preceding ten years.⁴

⁴ It is worth noting that even after Russia's renewed offensive in February 2022 and after the rhetoric of President Donald Trump, only 23 of 32 members met the 2 per cent spending floor agreed to at the Wales Summit. The communique agreed to by the member states in 2014 did, however, state that NATO would 'aim' to achieve the 2 per cent. It was, nevertheless, seen as an official floor for political purposes.

- **The ability of the European member states of NATO and of the European Union to meet the increased demands of defence spending and rearmament will remain constrained by industrial capacity, workforce, and demographic challenges, and competing political priorities.** The European Union will seek a greater role in defence but will experience friction with NATO and pressure from the sovereignty of member states as it does so.
- **The character of war will continue to change with increasing automation and integration of uncrewed and autonomous systems. These systems will become increasingly capable but will not substitute traditional platforms or munitions.** Western militaries, including NATO members, will become blended forces of high and conventional tech capabilities. Uncrewed systems will augment but not replace human mass and traditional military power. They will develop a new form of mass, with which allied militaries will need to contend in terms of force generation and adversary capability.
- **Climate instability will be a contributing factor to nation-state and non-nation-state violence and interactions.** The reduction or disappearance of year-round sea-ice in the Arctic will open the Northern Sea Route (all of which is in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Russia) to increased maritime traffic from the People's Republic of China to European ports. The Arctic will, as a result, become increasingly important as a zone of contest and exploitation.

Britain's national interests

Within this environment the United Kingdom's defence strategy will seek to ensure the defence of the realm but also attempt to shape conditions where possible to pursue British national interests. Defence is a central tool in any national toolbox, alongside diplomacy, information, and economics (defence is used interchangeably for military in the DIME model). This paper is based on the following, primary political and defence assumptions about Britain's strategic position:

- **The United Kingdom is not at risk of a conventional military invasion and will remain so for the foreseeable future.**
- **The primary nation-state threat to British national interests on the continent of Europe and Britain's near-abroad is and will remain the Russian Federation.** This could manifest across the spectrum of sub-threshold or hybrid threats, as well as conventional long-range strike. The risk of conventional war with Russia cannot be discounted, and if hostilities were to escalate, British territory could become subject to adversary action.
- **The United Kingdom is highly unlikely to enter a future conflict without allies or partners.** London will, however, seek to retain the capacity to deploy and sustain forces to protect its national interest, if allies or partners are unwilling to support or work in concert (e.g. the Falkland Islands). In the event of conflict, the United Kingdom will remain reliant on allied enabling capabilities in the European theatre.
- **NATO will remain the primary trans-national organisation for European continental defence and deterrence.** The United Kingdom will remain a part of, and seek a leading role in, the political-military Alliance provided it can redevelop credible and sustainable military power. It will pursue its defence interests via overlapping and mutually supportive bilateral and multilateral arrangements.
- **The United Kingdom will remain a distinct nation-state apart from the European Union over the period covered by this paper.** His Majesty's Government will, however, selectively engage with both the trans-national bloc and with individual member states of the Union when

it is beneficial for British national interests.

- **The United Kingdom will retain its quasi-independent nuclear deterrent**—Continuous At-Sea Deterrent (CAS-D)—and will continue maintenance and modernisation efforts across the full spectrum of the nuclear enterprise.
- **The United Kingdom's overseas territorial interests in the South Atlantic (e.g. Falkland Islands), Caribbean (e.g. Bermuda), and Mediterranean (e.g. Gibraltar and Cyprus) must and will remain part of Britain's strategic calculus.** Sea lines of communication into the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific will be of reduced priority but nonetheless serve as an important part of the United Kingdom's strategic posture. Political machinations notwithstanding (e.g. Chagos), His Majesty's Government should prioritise the preservation of these territories as vital expressions of British national interest and strategic reach.

In addition to the strategic environment and assumptions about Britain's national interests, there are domestic considerations and political and economic conditions that will affect London's ability to generate and sustain support for the defence strategy outlined in this paper. **Any assessment of Britain's fiscal and political environment through 2035 is inherently uncertain. This paper does not attempt to resolve questions of tax policy, social welfare spending, demographic change, or broader macroeconomic conditions. It nonetheless assumes that the United Kingdom will operate, by necessity, in a resource-constrained environment, relative both to the breadth of its existing defence commitments and to the cost of sustaining a full spectrum, globally engaged force.**

This paper does, however, assume the continued existence of a broad political and societal consensus that Britain's security is anchored in NATO and the EuroAtlantic; that maintaining a close security relationship with the United States is desirable; and that some sustained increase in defence and security spending from current levels is both necessary and acceptable. **If any of these preconditions were to fail, the strategy proposed in this paper would require reconsideration, as would any serious British defence posture.** Resolving the wider political or constitutional questions that might follow from such a failure lies beyond the scope of this analysis.

The strategic approach this paper outlines is not simply a response to scarcity. Rather, it is a long-overdue recognition of the mismatch between Britain's power and interests in a changing world proposes difficult strategic choices as a result. In essence, greater resources would permit the same strategy to be implemented at greater scale but would *not* alter its core tenets or the ordering of priorities.

2. The problems of existing British defence concepts



Main points

- The 2025 Strategic Defence Review correctly prioritises NATO, identifies Russia as the main threat, and emphasises readiness, innovation, and industrial power.
- The SDR fails to define a clear British way of war or translate limited resources into disciplined choices about roles, capabilities, and theatres.
- The SDR's combination of NATO-first rhetoric, global ambition, and an integrated-force model risks continued overreach unless Britain adopts a focused maritime organising principle.

In 2025 the Labour Government of Sir Keir Starmer published its Strategic Defence Review, promising the “first root-and-branch review of UK Defence in 25 years.”⁵ Led by Lord George Robertson, General Richard Barrons, and Fiona Hill, the SDR was to set out the defence stall for the newly elected Labour government, which had been out of power for 14 years. It is worth noting that, to varying degrees, all three had previously criticised aspects of British defence policy and practice and had reputations for independent judgement. They were, by reputation and design, not sycophants of the Government, which made the SDR a serious attempt at conceptual reform rather than a purely political exercise. **The SDR nonetheless succumbed to atmospheric political pressures in that the authors hedged their recommendations, rather than making clear choices and forcing the Government into a clearly defined course of action.**

What the 2025 Strategic Defence Review gets right

To the authors' credit, the SDR was undertaken with a rigorous discipline, seeking to survey as wide a range of British society and institutions as possible to define what the Government's defence priorities and orientation should become in a period of profound geopolitical and technological change. Critics charged that the SDR should and indeed could have been both shorter and delivered more swiftly but given the political environment and the need to deliver a considered document, the approach was sensible.

At a macro level the SDR had four notable successes.

NATO first and Euro-Atlantic primacy

First, it rightly prioritised that the United Kingdom's approach should fundamentally be 'NATO First', “putting NATO at the heart of how [the United Kingdom] plans to fight in the Euro-Atlantic area.”⁶ The SDR aimed to move British defence policy “to warfighting readiness to deter threats

5 HM Government, *The Strategic Defence Review 2025: Making Britain Safer—Secure at Home, Strong Abroad* (London: Ministry of Defence, June 2, 2025), 3. ([link](#))

6 HM Government, *The Strategic Defence Review 2025*, 38.

and strengthen security in the Euro-Atlantic.”⁷ This was not an entirely new direction but a consolidation and sharpening of themes already present in the 2023 Defence Command Paper (DCP), which had recentred the Euro-Atlantic as the United Kingdom’s theatre of interest. The DCP stated that “The Euro-Atlantic region will remain our clear priority and will continue to receive more investment and attract more activity than any other region.”⁸ **This continuity is a strength: it indicates that a cross-party consensus on EuroAtlantic primacy has now solidified. In this respect, the SDR’s strategic orientation is broadly consistent with the argument advanced in this paper; the problem, as discussed below, lies less in direction than in the discipline with which it is applied.** Critics charged, and not without reason, that the idea of ‘NATO first’ put European defence ahead of that of the United Kingdom, and that more resources were dedicated to defending Narva as opposed to Nottingham. This reflected the SDR’s assumption, and that of its predecessors, about forward defence and the centrality of defence to British national interests, without clearly enumerating this fact.

Russia as the principal defence planning threat

Second, and within this Euro-Atlantic framework, the SDR definitively stated that Russia represented the most “immediate and pressing threat.”⁹ **This represents the culmination of a steady, if slow, shift within British defence and political circles from viewing Russia as a potential partner, to a source of deniable ‘hybrid’ or subthreshold disruption, to recognising Moscow’s willingness and capacity to wage largescale conventional war in Europe.** Indeed, in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review, Russia was mentioned just four times, two instances of which were in the glossary.¹⁰ By David Cameron’s 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review, the threat Russia posed had been more clearly recognised, but defined by Moscow’s “deniable, hybrid tactics and media manipulation” as opposed to the conventional military challenge.¹¹ Boris Johnson’s Integrated Review stated that Russia “is the most acute threat in the region” and asserted that “we will work with NATO Allies to ensure a united Western response, combining military, intelligence and diplomatic efforts.”¹² The 2025 Review goes further by treating Russia not only as an ‘acute’ threat but as the primary driver of British force planning, including for largescale conventional war in Europe.

Readiness, munitions, and the return of warfighting

Third, the SDR correctly identified the seriousness of readiness, munitions, and deterrence across defence. This reflected a significant change in the strategic environment in which both the United Kingdom and NATO operate. While stating that the Armed Forces had begun the process of transformation, the SDR rightly warned that the institutions “remain fundamentally shaped by the risks and demands of the post-Cold War era.”¹³ The collapse of the Soviet Union initiated a period of significant military drawdown as part of the “peace dividend”. Combined with a period of ‘out of area operations’ beyond NATO’s core territory and the events of 9/11, many assumed that

| 7 HM Government, *The Strategic Defence Review 2025*, 4.

| 8 HM Government, *Defence Command Paper 2023: Defence’s Response to a More Contested and Volatile World* (London: UK Ministry of Defence, 18 July 2023), 55. ([link](#))

| 9 *Strategic Defence Review 2025*, 28.

| 10 HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm. 7948 (London: The Stationery Office, October 2010), 18. ([link](#))

| 11 HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, Cm 9161 (London: The Stationery Office, November 2015), 18. ([link](#))

| 12 HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: Cabinet Office, March 16, 2021), 71. ([link](#))

| 13 HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, 34.

the likelihood of large-scale conventional war on the continent of Europe was low. Consequently, **instead of mass, mechanised armed forces, many planners assumed that NATO militaries—the United States included—would need expeditionary forces better suited and designed for low-intensity conflict and counterinsurgency operations. Ukraine would prove this assumption incorrect.** Despite the battlefield evidence emerging from Ukraine, and now Iran, this conceptual break with the post-Cold War mindset remains incomplete and ongoing.

The SDR also rightly identifies that an era of transformational change in defence capabilities is ongoing. As both the conflict in Ukraine and America's operations against Iran have demonstrated, the character of war is increasingly shifting towards autonomous and uncrewed systems, and attritable mass. This is, however, not the 'era of the drone' as some have suggested. **Heavy, crewed systems including main battle tanks, ships, and submarines, for example, do still and will continue to matter. The question as some have observed is not so much what the drone can do, but what military objectives they are incapable of achieving independently, for example taking and holding territory. The high and low mixture of 20-40-40 outlined by the SDR is a useful theoretical framework for thinking about future force design.** Under this model a force design would consist of "20% crewed platforms to control 40% 'reusable' platforms (such as drones that survive repeated missions), and 40% 'consumables' such as rockets, shells, missiles, and 'one-way effector' drones."¹⁴ This model is, in the SDR's concept, managed by a digital targeting web—also known as a 'kill chain' or 'kill web'—that links sensors to shooters, and enables the delivery of desired effects in a contested environment.

Innovation and industrial power as strategic assets

Fourth, the SDR stressed the importance of innovation, dedicating an entire chapter to the subject. The authors rightly asserted that "innovation and industrial power are central to deterrence and decisive factors in war."¹⁵ The SDR identifies that most of the innovation occurs in the private sector and that, as such, the British Armed Forces need to become better and closer partners with industry. Both the importance of innovation and the challenge of working with industry are lessons not unique to the United Kingdom, but something all NATO members continue to contend with following February 2022. **The SDR's emphasis on innovation and industrial power is therefore well judged, but incomplete. The unresolved issue is the lack of clear prioritisation between competing agendas and legacy commitments, and the parallel desire to innovate.** Equally, the role of government in innovation is overemphasised. The government can and should play a leading role in specialised innovation for which there is no commercial market. It must simultaneously take advantage of the emergent defence industrial base and commercial-off-the-shelf technologies where possible. The centre of innovation gravity is no longer in the hands of the government.

Taken together, these four points—NATO first, the clear recognition of Russia as an adversary, a renewed focus on readiness, and the attention to innovation—orient British defence in a direction that this paper broadly endorses. Where the SDR falls short is in turning these correct instincts into a disciplined strategic concept, a challenge addressed in the rest of this chapter.

| 14 HM Government, *Strategic Defence Review 2025*, 110.

| 15 HM Government, *Strategic Defence Review 2025*, 51

Where the 2025 Strategic Defence Review falls short

No clear British way of war

The stated goal of the SDR authors is to create an integrated force that is “more lethal than the sum of its parts and skilled in warfare in different forms” and one that can “dominate all five domains.”¹⁶ **Again, while not wrong, the SDR fails to articulate a conceptual ‘British way of war’ that enables force design alignment against established national priorities.**¹⁷ The SDR did not define what the integrated force is designed to do or what effects it is intended to develop and deliver. **An integrated force is an organisational goal, one that should follow politically defined national defence priorities.** It also does not accept and adequately translate the United Kingdom’s resource constraints into a focused set of roles and capabilities.

Hedging instead of choosing

Given the state of profound geostrategic and technological change, the authors and the Government could have used the SDR as a driver of similarly profound change within defence. **Yet rather than selecting a clear and achievable course for the Armed Forces, it spread and hedged its recommendations in two ways: first, by stating ‘NATO first’, but maintaining an emphasis on global prioritise; and second, in terms of capability types (e.g. high tech versus mass).** Both hedges reflect the absence of an overarching strategic defence concept around which the Armed Forces could be built.

Analytically, one can imagine alternative strategic courses the SDR might have advocated: a return to a landheavy posture; a bid for strategic autonomy; or a radical downsizing in favour of massed uncrewed systems. The point is not that any of these are the course the United Kingdom should take, but that each would have made clear choices and more effectively driven force design.

Organisation before strategy

In failing to define a clear defence direction, the SDR fails to provide sufficient or appropriate organisational guidance. For example, the emphasis on broad innovation and technological integration strains limited budgetary resources leaving key questions unanswered: how should the United Kingdom prioritise its investments? Should it spend more on traditional mass such as artillery for ‘warfighting readiness’, on advanced technology stacks for integration and communication, or accept limitations on both by spreading investment across each silo? Ultimately, an integrated force is not a strategy; it is an organising principle designed to achieve articulated, politically established defence ends, which the authors leave largely unanswered. The SDR puts the force’s form before its strategic function.

NATO first, but not NATO focused

The SDR is right to insist that ‘NATO first’ does not mean ‘NATO only’, but it then fails to spell out where and how non-NATO commitments are constrained by this hierarchy. It also fails to acknowledge Britain’s unique strategic geography which is unchangeable and a comparative advantage for the United Kingdom, as is discussed below. **The combination of NATO first rhetoric, global**

¹⁶ HM Government, *Strategic Defence Review 2025*, 96

¹⁷ Andrew Lambert’s *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy* offers an exceptional historical analysis of the search for an answer to this question. Andrew Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021)

integrated force ambitions, and open-ended commitments to frameworks such as AUKUS without prioritisation risks dispersing finite resources across too many theatres and too many mission sets. In effect, the SDR appears to build forwards from domestic service politics and institutional needs to alliance commitments, rather than starting from NATO roles and working backwards. For a strategy that claims to be 'NATO first', that sequencing is significant.

Global ambition, limited capacity

Beyond NATO, internal tension is found within Britain's global ambitions. While the SDR sensibly dispenses with the idea of 'Global Britain' it nonetheless remains too ambitious in its scope. **A force prioritised for NATO operations and the Euro-Atlantic is not one optimised for activities in the Indo-Pacific.** There are, of course, overlaps as seemingly evidenced by Operation Highmast, the eight-month deployment to the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Indo-Pacific led by the United Kingdom Carrier Strike Group. **While politically and diplomatically successful, the effort exposed significant limitations within the British Armed Forces: the long spin-up time, considerable American enabling support required, and a lengthy post-tour recovery and maintenance period, the latter of which meant Britain's power projection capabilities were markedly circumscribed.** Operation Highmast did provide valuable interoperability data and experience, but the benefits were outweighed by both the pre- and post-operational costs and the concomitant risk that resulted. Had a major crisis erupted in the Euro-Atlantic while the carrier group was extended in the Indo-Pacific, the United Kingdom would have faced a stark choice between abandoning a highvisibility deployment or accepting reduced responsiveness in its primary theatre. The SDR does not acknowledge this kind of tradeoff.

A strategy that risks overreach

Taken together, these elements suggest that the SDR's central weakness was not misidentifying Britain's main theatre or principal adversary but refusing to make choices that would materially impact and drive force design and global posture. The authors sought to develop an integrated, globally capable force without clearly stating the purpose of that force. The result is a strategy that not just overreaches, but overreaches with a hollow force. This paper therefore takes the Review's correct identification of ends as a starting point but argues for a different organising principle: a Britain-first, maritime-first concept that explicitly chooses specialisation and makes the tradeoffs the Review largely avoids.

3. Towards a Britain-first, maritime-first defence concept



Main points

- A Britain-first, maritime-first concept would align defence with Britain's island geography, comparative advantages, national interests, and finite resources.
- A modernised version of Sir Julian Corbett's maritime strategy would expand command of communications across the sea, seabed, air, space, and cyber domains, prioritising the North Atlantic, High North, and Northern Europe.
- Britain should pursue limited coalition warfare, project power selectively from the maritime domain, and practise offshore engagement by providing specialised capabilities to NATO.

The SDR, as noted in the previous chapter gets some things right and others wrong. It accurately identifies both the primary theatre for and strategic challenge to British national interests. **The authors, however, ignore the central question: *what are the British Armed Forces for?*** Instead, it attempts to satisfy multiple, competing political and service interests, and, in so doing, fails to make the necessary conceptual or capability trade-offs. This represents a missed opportunity to articulate a coherent concept of how Britain should fight its wars. The rest of this paper attempts to fill that gap by advancing a concept that is not constrained by shortterm political or service interests.

For Britain to succeed in this new geostrategic era it should pursue a Corbett-inspired, Britain-first, maritime-first, offshore engagement defence concept. This strategy puts the United Kingdom's core national interests front and centre, recognises its unique strategic geography, leverages British comparative advantages, and offers a framework for allocating limited defence pounds that is also resource agnostic. Additional funds would change the scale and readiness, but not the fundamental structure or outlined specialisation.

Sir Julian Corbett and the maritime strategy

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, naval historian and strategist Sir Julian Corbett outlined a maritime framework for the United Kingdom that would leverage the country's strengths and comparative advantages and allow it to exert decisive influence in key theatres without overcommitting beyond its means. This approach sensibly reflected the lessons of Britain's recent wars and sought to translate those lessons into a meaningful strategy that would secure the United Kingdom territorially and protect its interests on the continent, while avoiding costly standing armies and sustained engagement in Europe.

Corbett recognised that Britain's imperial power was inextricably tied to its nature as an island state: it was a strength in that provided a natural barrier to invasion and allowed Britain to selectively engage, but also a strategic vulnerability in its reliance on imports.

He advocated for the maximisation of maritime power, and the development of amphibious and littoral capabilities in lieu of sustaining a large, standing, continental army. He argued that Britain's aim should be command of maritime communications, rather than treating the destruction of the enemy fleet as the military end, as his American counterpart Alfred Thayer Mahan tended to emphasise. **For Corbett, command of the sea was transitory and contested: it meant a degree of control over trade routes and sea lines of communication (SLOC) sufficient to support national policy, not absolute uncontested dominance.**

Maritime and naval power, in Corbett's view, did not exist in isolation but were tools for achieving political objectives. British national interests lay in protecting her own SLOCs and trade, and in retaining the ability to project limited but decisive land power onto the European continent when necessary. In so doing, Britain could avoid the costs of maintaining a large continental army, instead waging limited wars that were better matched to its resources.

The British Government would go on to adopt this defence strategy and, when paired with targeted diplomatic engagement, achieve considerable success in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While not all of Corbett's principles were adopted by the British Armed Forces, it remains a useful framework through which to consider the United Kingdom's present strategic and defence interests.

Principles for a neo-Corbett maritime strategy for the twenty-first century

While much has changed since Corbett wrote *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* in 1911, his strategic framework remains apt for today's geostrategic environment, technological change, and British national interest. Geographically the United Kingdom is and will remain an island nation-state; that is unavoidable. Accepting this fact and leaning into the maritime tradition, the United Kingdom can play a much more significant role in the Euro-Atlantic. There are, however, modern and necessary departures from Corbett.

Expanding command of communications beyond the sea

First, the maritime domain needs conceptual expansion. Corbett's command of communications was limited to the sea and oceanic surface. **Today it must now include the seabed, space, and cyber systems, and air corridors in and around the European continent—in essence the arteries of the modern economy and pathways for conventional and strategic defence.** The concept of sea control and sea denial needs expansion to 'area control' and 'area denial', which captures both maritime surface and subsurface activities as well as those in the air and space domains.

For Britain, securing these modern communications in the North Atlantic, High North, and Northern Europe must become the primary military duty. Securing these domains requires considerable investment and leveraging of advanced technologies, both of which will allow the United Kingdom to better specialise its own capabilities and better allocate its resources. **While the Royal Navy would take on greater precedence in this framing it must do so in a cross-domain manner and with every aspect of the integrated force concept.** Command of communications necessitates a whole-of-defence and whole-of-government approach.

Limited war in an era of nuclear and long-range strike

Second, the concept of limited war has evolved since Corbett's age. The advent of nuclear weapons adds a new and complex strategic dimension, as have long-range and deep precision strike capabilities. Holding adversary targets at risk extends engagement distances well beyond anything that Corbett could have conceived. Indeed, the development of maritime capabilities means that London can shape operational environments and deliver deterrent effects well outside of its immediate geographic area. Equally, Russia's possession of nuclear arms and its own long-range strike capabilities, to say nothing of sub-threshold or hybrid activities, means that the surface area of conflict is broader than during Corbett's time. **The United Kingdom should, nonetheless, pursue limited, coalition wars and not unilateral engagement except in the most extreme of circumstances such as in a Sovereign Small Scale Focused Intervention (e.g. the Falklands).**

Reframing power projection from the maritime domain

Third, in parallel with the development of robust maritime capabilities, Corbett's strategy emphasised amphibious power projection in lieu of a large standing continental army. The present strategic environment in Europe no longer necessitates such an approach. The likelihood that the United Kingdom will need to conduct theatre-level forced amphibious entry operations is low, and in that eventuality it would likely conduct such operations in concert with NATO allies including the United States. **Instead, power projection from the maritime domain consists of air and space power, air defence, and long-range and deep precision strike.**

From offshore balancing to offshore engagement

Finally, this neo-Corbettian approach is not primarily focused on the prevention of the emergence of a regional hegemon or continental rival as was previously the strategic objective. This is less a risk and is moderated by European political and economic integration and by NATO's collective defence system, making that possibility remote at present. Britain still seeks to prevent hostile aggression towards, or interference in, Europe, but will do so as part of an alliance in which multiple continental states are building substantial conventional forces. **Instead, the idea of offshore balancing evolves into one of offshore engagement with the European pillar of NATO.** Here the United Kingdom should aim to develop and provide meaningful capabilities to the alliance that also serve to advance its own defence and security interests.

4. Translating Corbett into a ‘Britain-first’, ‘maritime-first’ strategic concept



Main points

- The Armed Forces should defend the state, deter threats, lead within NATO, and advance British interests abroad through selective and sustainable engagement.
- Force design should prioritise Britain's home waters, Euro-Atlantic communications, homeland resilience, maritime power projection, modern deterrence, resilient command systems, and one credible land contribution to NATO.
- This focus requires explicit trade-offs, including a smaller but fully resourced Army, reduced Indo-Pacific presence, and no force designed for open-ended stabilisation or counterinsurgency, supported by stronger logistics, industry, and personnel systems.

The preceding chapters offered a diagnosis of the shortcomings of the most recent Strategic Defence Review and outlined a conceptual framework for how British defence should develop for the future. Looking to Britain's history, Sir Julian Corbett's maritime strategy offers a framework which suits Britain's capacity and capabilities in this modern era.

This chapter will translate this framework into sequential concrete policy actions. It first defines the political objectives of defence, answering the question of “what are the British Armed Forces for?” This is the question from which all others flow. The paper then details what strategic mission tasks flow from these, discusses what effects are necessary for defence to develop, and then identifies what trade-offs result from these conscious policy choices.

A word of caution is necessary in that these strategic mission effects and the accompanying force generation implications are illustrative, but not exhaustive, and do not focus exclusively on specific systems or platforms. While some systems and platforms are referenced, this is again for illustrative purposes. This is to avoid an overly narrow focus on what should be purchased and acquired to deliver the effects. Indeed, this paper has sought to define first the political priorities of the Armed Forces and now seeks to translate those purposes into desired strategic effects and operational requirements, from which then flow the military's joint- and service-based force design implications. The service-specific design implications are beyond the scope of this paper, but worth further exploration.

What are the British Armed Forces for?

The SDR correctly states that “The fundamental role of the Armed Forces is to deter threats so that fighting a war—in defence of the UK, the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, and

allies—is not necessary.”¹⁸ This is, however, an incomplete identification of the necessary implicit tasks that come from this main objective.

Articulation of the following four political tasks is necessary to define necessary strategic mission tasks that defence must execute:

1. Defend the United Kingdom and preserve the integrity of the British state.
2. Deter, prevent, and, if necessary, defeat threats to Britain and its vital interests.
3. Lead in NATO collective defence and secure the Euro-Atlantic.
4. Pursue and advance British interests abroad through selective, sustainable engagement.

Meeting these national defence priorities is not possible without the United Kingdom possessing the capacity to generate, sustain, and, where necessary, regenerate military power over the course of a prolonged crisis or conflict. National resilience, industrial capacity, munitions stockpiles, logistics, reserve forces, skilled personnel, secure supply chains, and public consent are therefore not secondary administrative concerns. Rather, they are the strategic foundations upon which British defence policy rests. Without them, the United Kingdom will be unable to defend the realm, meet its obligations to NATO, or sustain meaningful military operations over time. These are the core tasks assigned to the British Armed Forces. The question then becomes how the Armed Forces should translate these into policy.

Defining strategic mission tasks for the British Armed Forces

Translating this framework into action requires the articulation of what are here termed as **'strategic mission tasks'**—priorities that flow from the politically defined national defence priorities. The exam question then becomes 'Given this changing strategic and technological environment, how can the United Kingdom achieve its political aims through the generation and deployment of military force?'

In essence, **these are the tasks for defence around which the Armed Forces should be designed.** To the Ministry of Defence's credit, there is thinking underway along these lines. The challenge is, however, translating this intellectual rigor into practical policy outcomes. There are, naturally, overlaps between these mission tasks: they are by design mutually reinforcing. Achieving strength in one area enables operations and strength in another, thus providing greater effects per pound spent.

Recognise Britain's unique strategic geography as an organising principle

The United Kingdom is an island nation, an unchanging geographic fact that provides innumerable strategic advantages, and which should serve as a central framework for defence. Indeed, recognising and exploiting the strategic geography of the United Kingdom is central to this maritime-first strategy. This geography must be reflected in the prioritisation of operating domains.

First and foremost, the United Kingdom must prioritise its immediate waters: the North Atlantic, Arctic, and High North. These are the home waters and without area control, operations

| 18 Lambert, *The British Way of War*. 36

further afield are beyond consideration. This includes control of the North Atlantic, GIUK gap, and Norwegian Sea. Within this, the United Kingdom, in concert with key allies such as Norway, will ensure that sea lines of communication and reinforcement between the United States and Europe remain open and uncontested. Such an approach will also deliver a meaningful effect for the 'special relationship', positioning the United Kingdom to cover off America's eastern flank.

Second, its geography allows the United Kingdom maritime power projection into the Baltic Sea, North Sea, and Northern Europe. This is central to Britain's defence support to NATO and reach into continental affairs. Here, in concert with its NATO partners, the United Kingdom seeks to ensure at a minimum area denial, preventing the uncontested movement of the Russian Navy and maritime and air assets. Littoral and archipelagic warfare capabilities will be maintained.

Third, by virtue of the British Overseas Territory in Gibraltar and sovereign base areas in Cyprus, the Royal Navy can and indeed does project power into the Mediterranean Sea and Middle East, and the associated sea lines of communication. Here again, area denial will be the primary focus against Russia when present, but also ensuring maritime security, protection of shipping, allied support, and the ability to respond where HMG determines British interests are engaged.

Finally, while Diego Garcia remains central to British and indeed American strategic calculus, the Indo-Pacific should be deprioritised as an area of explicit and direct British hard power reach and presence. This is not to suggest that His Majesty's Government cannot influence events in the region, but that doing so is beyond the interests and capacity of Britain to do and sustain in a credible manner and in an independent capacity.

Britain's chief priority is to ensure that its home waters and approaches, and the Euro-Atlantic reinforcement corridor, remain sufficiently secure for national defence and alliance operations. This does not require an expectation of uncontested sea control; it does require the ability to prevent an adversary from using the maritime domain to isolate Britain, disrupt transatlantic reinforcement, or dictate the terms of access to Northern Europe.

Force generation implications

To leverage Britain's unique strategic geography, HMG should focus on developing the following effects when designing the Armed Forces.

First, Britain's home waters must be secure and usable, which include its territorial waters, exclusive economic zone, maritime approaches, and the seabed. This includes developing a force that can, as noted above, ensure that the United Kingdom's critical undersea infrastructure is protected, resilient, and rapidly recoverable. This, of course, is not solely the responsibility of the state and requires close coordination with private industry and economic partners such as Norway.

Second, the force should be designed to ensure that the reinforcement and economic corridor between the United States and the United Kingdom, and from the United Kingdom into NATO, remains open and free from interference from Russia. The United Kingdom should pursue sea control capabilities in and around the GIUK gap and associated waters. This in turn means developing a force that can deliver area denial effects against Russia, making it unable to operate in an uncontested manner in the North Atlantic, North Sea, High North, or Baltic Sea.

In keeping these waterways open, the United Kingdom can ensure that there is access to and freedom of movement around NATO's northern flank and into Northern Europe in the event of a large-scale crisis, necessitating American intervention. Generating these effects necessitates the development of a joint maritime force that can conduct robust ASW, AD, and ISR-T activities.

Third, the British Armed Forces should develop joint capabilities to conduct selected maritime operations further into NATO's southern flank and the Middle East. These should be developed to ensure that critical SLOCs remain open and strategic chokepoints uncontested. Hard-power commitments to the Indo-Pacific come after, and because of, the generation and delivery of these effects.

Collectively, these effects will see the Armed Forces ensuring British national interests while becoming a decisive, credible, and capable Euro-Atlantic ally to both the United States and NATO.

Preserve the integrity of the British state

The central task of the British Armed Forces, or any country's armed forces, is the protection of the state, its people, and its institutions. While the United Kingdom does not face, and is unlikely to face, immediate threats to its territorial integrity from nation-state adversaries, the Armed Forces are nonetheless tasked with ensuring the preservation and protection of the state. The security and defence of the United Kingdom is achieved first through the Armed Forces themselves, and second through Britain's participation and engagement in multilateral and bilateral arrangements.

As this mission thread's geographic reach extends outwards from the United Kingdom's territory so does the responsibility of the Armed Forces. For example, the Armed Forces are tasked with providing support to civil authorities in the event of national (natural or otherwise) emergencies, providing resilience and redundancy as and when necessary. **The Armed Forces can and indeed should assume primacy for the protection of critical national infrastructure from nation-state and non-nation state threat actors.** This includes the development of localised integrated air and missile defence (IAMDS) with counter-UAS (CUAS) capabilities. Such a network is, however, a last defence. As described below, the development and delivery of deterrent effects is a more cost-advantageous and effective counter to the creation of a 'British Dome' designed to counter every missile and drone threat. Such a shield, while rhetorically attractive, is cost prohibitive, technologically challenging, and unnecessary.

The security of Britain's energy and communications infrastructure from kinetic and cyber-attacks are equally of central importance and a responsibility of the Armed Forces. **Here the Royal Navy (along with the Royal Air Force where appropriate) is tasked with ensuring sea control of its territorial waters, cooperating with the private sector to ensure the protection of subsea assets, and delivering deterrent effects in the waterways around the United Kingdom.**

Force generation implications

The objective of homeland defence is not to construct an impermeable shield against adversary action or influence around the United Kingdom—this is an unrealistic prospect. Rather it is **the generation of effects and capabilities to ensure that no adversary can coerce, paralyse, or prevent the British state from functioning, exercising its freedom of action, or pursuing national interests.** The Armed Forces should therefore generate effects that protect the population, maintain, and protect critical infrastructure, deny coercive leverage through limited

attack, preserve continuity of government, and sustain the national base (defence, industrial, and economic) from which Britain's own and NATO's military power is generated. In short, **the overriding objective is to recognise the potential for adversarial influence in these domains and align capacity and capability to minimise such effects.**

This necessitates **a robust capability to detect, identify, attribute, and respond to capabilities across the spectrum of conflict from sub-threshold 'hybrid' or 'grey zone' activities through to direct conventional attack.** While seeking to avoid the development of an air defence 'national dome' which is technologically challenging and fiscally prohibitive, **the Armed Forces should seek instead to develop limited, prioritised, layered defence capabilities around critical national infrastructure.** In lieu of such a 'national dome' the development of forward deterrent effects, discussed below, should be prioritised. The net effect of this capability generation is a secure and stable British state and population, from which British national power is developed and projected—it is the first principle from which all other aspects derive.

Defence should contribute to those aspects of critical national infrastructure protection that require unique military capabilities, such as in the maritime domain, air and missile defence, and cyber defence. It should do so within a whole-of-government resilience framework in which civilian departments, regulators, infrastructure owners, and local authorities retain their respective responsibilities.

Project power in and from the maritime domain

This paper advocates the development of an integrated maritime force that can secure the United Kingdom's territorial integrity, leverage its unique strategic geography, and deliver effects primarily from and through the maritime domain. This necessitates a significant focus on and investment in ASW and AD capabilities and the development of long-range and deep precision strike from Royal Navy and Royal Air Force assets. **The objective is to ensure the preservation of the state, first, but second the delivery of deterrent effects and, if necessary, warfighting capability against nation-state adversaries.**

Nearer to the United Kingdom's territorial waters this manifests in area control, but, as elaborated above, it transitions to area denial in the Arctic and High North and towards the Mediterranean Sea and Middle East to ensure the maintenance of SLOCs. The delivery of these effects is magnified by the United Kingdom's joint production and cooperation with partners such as Norway through the development of the Type 26 frigate and Germany through the joint production of the deep precision strike missile.

Force generation implications

The purpose of Britain's joint maritime force is not simply to operate ships, submarines, and aircraft across multiple theatres. Rather it is to generate and deliver a set of strategic effects from the maritime domain to ensure the preservation of the United Kingdom's freedom of action in pursuit of its interests, prevent its isolation, and enable NATO operations in Northern and Eastern Europe. **The central strategic effect is that the United Kingdom and its allies retain the ability to operate in and from the maritime domain in the Euro-Atlantic, while adversaries are denied the ability to use that domain uncontested.** This effect is prioritised geographically, focusing first on Britain's territorial waters, but extending into the North Atlantic, North Sea, High North, and into the Baltic Sea. Additional maritime effects are generated for the Mediterranean and Middle East, and finally into the Pacific as discussed in the preceding section on the United Kingdom's strategic

geography.

Maritime power must also generate credible deterrent and warfighting options. **Britain should be able to identify, track, and, where necessary, disrupt hostile activity below the threshold of major war; protect and restore critical seabed and offshore infrastructure; and impose proportionate conventional (and, if necessary strategic) costs from the maritime domain.** Such options should reinforce the United Kingdom's wider deterrent posture and complement the nuclear deterrent while providing decision-makers with credible responses below that threshold.

The United Kingdom should retain the ability to project power selectively from the maritime domain in support of national interests and alliance commitments. In practice, this means being able to reinforce Northern Europe and to contribute to maritime security in adjacent theatres such as in and from the Baltic Sea. This includes offering supporting special operations capabilities, conducting amphibious and littoral activity, and generating conventional strike options. This does not require Britain to maintain a routine, independent hard-power presence in every theatre or to design the force around distant interventions that compromise readiness in the Euro-Atlantic.

These effects require a joint maritime force that can develop and maintain undersea situational awareness and command-and-control. Britain requires enduring maritime surveillance and the ability to integrate sensing, ASW, targeting, and communications across the Euro-Atlantic. These functions translate into the delivery of conventional area control and area denial effects. Britain requires a persistent undersea presence in constrained northern and littoral waters, without drawing disproportionately on its nuclear submarine force; this could come from the acquisition of air-independent propulsion submarines as well as uncrewed systems, as discussed below. Long-range precision fires from the maritime domain support conventional warfighting within Northern and Eastern Europe. Britain must retain a selective ability to generate air power, conventional strike, and limited littoral access from the maritime domain.

Developing these effects requires a blend of crewed and autonomous systems, tied together in an overarching digital targeting network also known as a 'kill web' or 'kill chain'. Such a networked system will allow for the United Kingdom, and its allies, to maintain decisive advantage in decision speed—being able to identify, interpret, and classify targets, and direct effects from appropriate munitions or systems faster than the enemy can react. Such a high-low mix improves persistence and resilience, generates its own form of mass, and contributes to affordability (though this should not be a driving priority; merely an ancillary benefit). Britain must retain sufficient surface-combatant capacity to defend maritime forces, protect reinforcement routes, and sustain operations under air and missile threat.

The purpose of this hybrid approach is not technological novelty, but a fleet capable of maintaining awareness, imposing uncertainty on an adversary, and sustaining operations in contested waters. Indeed, autonomy should augment persistence and mass, while the force must still be able to fight if autonomous systems are jammed, deceived, destroyed, or politically restricted. The specific mix of platforms and programmes required to deliver these effects should be assessed against mission needs, industrial capacity, personnel availability, and allied interoperability.

Shape and deliver modern deterrent effects

CAS-D is an independent national deterrent that contributes to NATO's wider nuclear-deterrence posture. It ensures that the United Kingdom retains a secure second-strike capacity while reinforcing the defence and deterrence (DDA) mission of NATO (along with the United States and France, which itself is considering extending its deterrent umbrella further). The existence of CAS-D ensures that Russian strategic calculus is complicated by having a second source of decision-making outside of and independent from the United States in the event of hostilities.

Nuclear weapons principally deter nuclear attack and the most extreme forms of coercion; they do not, in and of themselves, prevent conventional, cyber, maritime, or hybrid aggression below the nuclear threshold. **Britain should therefore communicate that attacks on its people, critical infrastructure, military forces, and ability to meet alliance commitments will carry consequences, while retaining ambiguity over the timing, scale, domain, and form of any response.** Red line and strategic thresholds should be communicated without tying political leadership to proscriptive response plans that prevent flexibility and adaptability.

The goal of modern deterrence is to balance risk tolerance with investment cost. For example, a national Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) network or dome akin to America's 'Golden Dome' or Israel's 'Iron Dome' would be prohibitively expensive. Developing low cost-per-kill capabilities to counter drones is a more viable prospect than building out a system capable of countering ballistic and hypersonic missiles. Rather, signalling the consequences of such an attack ahead of its conduct would serve to protect the British homeland, allow prioritisation of resources, and ideally prevent it from occurring in the first place.

Additionally, the United Kingdom should see to continue to develop its leading-edge cyberspace capabilities, which offer policymakers additional options and serve to support intelligence collection. This is a core feature of the task discussed below, which is the necessity of developing capabilities to support the command of communications.

Force generation implications

The purpose of British deterrence policy is to ensure that no adversary deems threatened or actual coercion, limited attack, or escalation against the United Kingdom and its vital interests to be an acceptable path to achieving political or military aims. Therefore, the central strategic effect is ensuring that Britain retains freedom of action in crisis and conflict: that HMG cannot be intimidated into abandoning its national interests or alliance commitments by nuclear threats, conventional attack, cyber disruption, or hybrid coercion. This is not solely a defence function but requires close coordination with and across ministries and departments to ensure a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to domestic resilience. It is insufficient to deliver deterrent effects abroad alone; ensuring deterrence by resilience is an equally important function.

Deterrence begins with, first the maintenance of a secure and credible independent nuclear capability, CAS-D. This ensures that no adversary can expect to remove Britain's capacity to impose unacceptable costs through a first strike or nuclear coercion. It also reinforces NATO's collective deterrent posture by ensuring that decision-making over Britain's deterrent remains sovereign. Additionally, CAS-D contributes to NATO's broader ability to deter by providing a secure second source of strategic decision-making for adversaries to consider.

Nuclear deterrence alone, however, is insufficient to prevent coercion below the nuclear threshold. Britain must therefore seek to develop capabilities that will threaten to, and, if necessary, impose proportionate conventional costs. In so doing, denying an adversary confidence that limited attack will succeed, while retaining credible options across operational domains. The intended effect is to ensure that any potential attack on critical infrastructure, military forces, allied reinforcement routes, or other vital British national interests cannot be treated as low-risk or cost-free options by adversaries.

This requires a balanced deterrence architecture below the nuclear threshold. Long-range conventional strike provides response options by holding adversary targets at risk. Prioritised air and missile defence, counter-UAS, hardening, and resilience reduce the expected benefit of adversary attack. Cyber and intelligence capabilities improve warning, attribution, disruption, and response to hybrid and grey zone threats, as well as conventional attacks. Forward-deployed British forces and NATO integration demonstrate the United Kingdom's capacity to act with allies. A robust British national defence industrial base ensures magazine and stockpile depth, signalling capacity to sustain military operations over time. Together, these measures serve to develop deterrent effects, constraining the ability of adversaries to dictate the tempo or threshold of escalation.

Britain should communicate resolve without relying on rigid public red lines or automatic response promises. **The government should make clear that attacks on the United Kingdom's people, critical national infrastructure, military forces, or ability to meet NATO commitments will carry consequences, while preserving ambiguity over the timing, scale, and form of any British response.** Deterrence depends on credible capability and evident political will, but it also depends on an adversary's uncertainty about how and where Britain may choose to act.

Programmes, for example, such as AUKUS, GCAP, and the F-35 dual-capable aircraft (DCA) should be judged by whether they improve survivable strike, air defence, targeting, and NATO interoperability, ultimately delivering deterrent effects, not by their value as standalone industrial or prestige projects.

Support NATO command of the commons and communications

Success on the modern battlefield requires integration of systems and sensors and closing the kill-chain at the speed of data, but more broadly the command of communications and decision advantage. **The United Kingdom should seek to lead on the development of an integrated, inter-service, allied command and control system that enables intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting (ISR-T).** This necessitates the development of a robust backbone to support the scale and speed of transmission necessary for machine-to-machine connectivity and AI-enabled operations. Current data rates are insufficient, and the development of these pipelines is vital for both national and economic security.

Force generation implications

The purpose of the integrated kill web is not to create a universal network in which every platform is connected to every other system. It is to ensure that Britain and its allies execute the 'observe, orient, decide, and act' (OODA) loop more quickly and more effectively than an adversary. **Within a Britain-first, maritime-first strategy, the central strategic effect is therefore that the United Kingdom and NATO develop and retain decision advantage and command of critical communications in the Euro-Atlantic, even under sustained attack and in a degraded environment.** This requires the maintenance of a joint operational picture across domains—a

truly integrated picture of the battlefield. This includes the ability to connect sensors to strike assets. It does not require every system to be connected continuously, nor should it assume that seamless digital connectivity will survive first contact with a capable adversary.

The United Kingdom should seek to build a resilient and graduated command-and-control architecture, to include networked systems, data integration, AI-enabled analysis, and automated targeting. This system architecture must, however, be resilient and contain redundancy by design. The intended effect is that an adversary cannot gain decisive advantage by, for example, blinding British forces, disrupting satellite links, overwhelming data systems, or severing key networks.

In this context, space is a central component of modern command of communications. Space-based ISR, satellite communications, data relay, and positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) are vital components of this joint operating picture and require investment and attention. Britain should combine sovereign, allied, and commercial space services, while investing in redundancy and terrestrial alternatives to reduce vulnerability to PNT jamming and spoofing, evidence of which is routinely seen on the Eastern flank. Britain will continue to depend partly on allied and commercial PNT services, but should reduce vulnerability by pursuing alternative PNT solutions, to include terrestrial fallback systems. The objective is not full sovereign autonomy across every space function but assured enough access and resilience that the loss or degradation of one system does not paralyse British action.¹⁹

Britain should seek to become a leading European contributor to NATO's ability to sense, connect, target, and sustain operations. This is a natural area of comparative advantage: a focused British contribution in ISR-T, cyber, electronic warfare, space-enabled capabilities, and resilient C2 can make allied forces more effective without attempting to duplicate American capabilities in full. Such a role also supports British industrial strength in software, sensors, secure communications, data processing, autonomous systems, and space services.

Special operations forces are also an essential human component of this architecture. They provide reconnaissance, contextualised intelligence, partner engagement, targeting support, and access in environments where technical collection alone may be insufficient, in addition to direct action when necessary. Exploiting this advantage requires sustained investment in selection, training, specialist support, and force regeneration, as well as careful management of the operational tempo imposed on a relatively small community.

Deliver a credible and sustained British land contribution to NATO

The British Army's central priority in the European theatre is to develop, deploy, and sustain credible conventional combat power in support of the NATO mission to include current and future capability targets and support to the evolving Regional Defence Plans. **The United Kingdom, under this maritime-first strategy will echo Corbett's concept of offshore balancing by eschewing the creation of a large, standing army in the vein of the British Army of the Rhine.** While suitable for the Cold War, this is neither in Britain's national interests nor within its current capabilities to field such a force.

¹⁹ The London-based Council on Geostrategy has offered in-depth analysis and recommendations for how the United Kingdom should develop its space strategy. See: Gabriel Elefteriu, *UK Space Strategy and the National Space Interest: A Methodological Approach*, Strategic Defence Unit, No. 2025/23 (London: Council on Geostrategy, November 2025). ([link](#))

Rather, in addition to developing a credible conventional force via the British Army to support NATO operations and allied partners, the British Armed Forces should seek to develop high-end enabling capabilities necessary for modern combat operations. These include, for example, over-the-horizon ISR-T from terrestrial, maritime, and space domains. This will include delivering airborne early warning and command and control capabilities to NATO partners. Special operations forces, integrated with maritime, land, and air power, will contribute reconnaissance, targeting, partner force development and high-value operations that magnify allied land mass without requiring large British formations. Longrange and deep precision strike capabilities from land, air, and sea platforms will serve as offensive enablers.

Force generation implications

The purpose of British land power within a maritime-first strategy is not to recreate a large standing continental army such as the British Army of the Rhine. It is, instead, to provide a credible, high-readiness, and sustainable conventional contribution to NATO that strengthens deterrence on the alliance's northern and eastern flanks. Britain must therefore be able to deploy, integrate, and sustain a combined-arms formation within NATO regional plans. **The central strategic effect is that neither Russia nor any future adversary can regard the United Kingdom's conventional land contribution to NATO as purely symbolic, hollow, or incapable of being sustained.** Britain should be able to contribute meaningfully to the defence of NATO territory, delivering a deterrent effect and, if necessary, defeating aggression. This is Corbettian offshore balancing in practice: Britain contributes serious land power but does so as part of a wider alliance in which continental allies provide greater mass.

This requires a British joint land force that can operate as a coherent combined-arms formation under NATO command. It must be capable of manoeuvre, long-range fires, air and missile defence, engineering, logistics, medical support, communications, intelligence, and sustainment. Its value lies not only in combat power, but also in its ability to remain operational in a contested and degraded environment.

Britain should, therefore, seek to concentrate its land investment on generating one fully resourced and sustainable high-readiness division, rather than maintaining multiple incomplete formations. Such a force would form Britain's principal conventional land contribution to NATO's northern and eastern flanks and should be aligned to a defined set of regional plans and readiness requirements. Whether deployed forward persistently, rotated through allied territory, or held at high readiness in the United Kingdom, this division must be credible, sustainable, and fully resourced.

Following this effects-led logic, the 3rd Division is the most plausible institutional vehicle for this role. **The objective should be the full resourcing of 3rd Division as the United Kingdom's principal high-readiness conventional contribution to NATO.** The force must possess integrated long-range strike sufficient to support NATO's operational design and impose costs beyond the close battle. Before developing any additional forces, including a second deployable division-level formation, Britain must ensure that the primary formation possesses the manpower, equipment, munitions, and supporting functions necessary to meet its core mission. **No secondary division-level aspiration should be funded at the expense of the readiness, sustainment, and credibility of Britain's primary NATO land contribution.** The proposal is not that one division can independently defend NATO's eastern flank. It is, instead, that Britain should stop treating nominal but hollow force structure as credible capability and instead generate one contribution that can

be relied upon within a larger NATO force.

The land contribution should be strengthened by high-end joint enablers. Long-range conventional strike, ISR-T, airborne early warning, cyber, electronic warfare, integrated air and missile defence, special operations forces, and resilient command-and-control should enable British and allied formations to impose costs, protect themselves, and maintain operational tempo. These capabilities are especially valuable as they magnify British land mass without requiring the United Kingdom to match continental powers in the size of its standing army, which is neither feasible nor desirable, given the priorities outlined in this paper. Uncrewed systems, autonomous, and one-way attack capabilities should supplement this force. They should not be treated as substitutes for trained personnel, combined-arms competence, stockpiles, logistics, or operational mass. Similarly, layered air defence and counter-UAS must be understood as a force-protection effect: British units must be able to continue moving, communicating, concentrating, dispersing, and fighting under aerial threat rather than assuming access to uncontested airspace.

The ultimate test of this approach is not whether the Army can advertise a particular number of brigades or divisions. It is whether Britain can generate a force that NATO commanders will trust to arrive, fight, survive, and remain in theatre for as long as the mission requires.

What trade-offs result from these mission tasks?

Large-scale continental land forces

The development of an integrated maritime force requires greater emphasis and focus on the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, and a consolidation of the British Army to a smaller, but more capable force. The British Army will not recreate the British Army of the Rhine; this would not be in line with these mission tasks, nor within the capacity of the British state to fund and sustain. It is also strategically unnecessary given the approach outline in this paper. Instead, as discussed above, the British Army will concentrate on its commitments to NATO capability targets and regional defence plans.

This development does not mean that Britain is left without an Army. Rather, the Army that Britain generates is meaningful, credible, and sustainable instead of abstract, unrealistic, and overstretched. Consequently, Britain's future leaders will need to become more selective in their application of force, particularly in areas that do not fall within the immediate area of operations and that are lacking supporting partner forces (e.g. NATO).

Maintenance of continuous hard power defence presence in the Pacific

Leveraging Britain's strategic geography and emphasis on the Euro-Atlantic and surrounding waters necessitates a reduction in priority of the Indo-Pacific theatres. While Operation Highmast was a political success, it was exceedingly costly and required significant enabling support from the United States without which it is unlikely that the operation would have been possible. While the United Kingdom has significant interests in the region, these will be pursued through defence diplomacy, economic engagement, and opportunistic exploitation of gaps created by the People's Republic of China. **Diego Garcia will, of course, remain vitally important for the United Kingdom and that of the United States—it is an unsinkable element of Britain's defence posture.** The United Kingdom will also pursue its national interests in the Indian and Pacific oceans through the United States by enabling Washington's operations in the region. For example, the United Kingdom can and indeed should assume greater roles in the Mediterranean

Sea and waters around the Middle East. This would enable the United States to reallocate its own force posture before and in response to a crisis in the Pacific over, for example, Taiwan. **A concomitant effect of this reprioritisation of theatres is fewer resources for engagement in areas such as in Africa, and Latin and South America.** While remaining priorities, activities in these regions will be selective and directly tied to British national interest.

Open-ended conflict stabilisation, reconstruction, or counterinsurgency capabilities

The emphasis on operations in and around the Euro-Atlantic theatre and the accompanying mission thread prioritisation consciously accepts that **His Majesty's Government will not develop forces capable of or designed for open-ended stabilisation, reconstruction, or counterinsurgency operations such as those undertaken after 11 September in Afghanistan and Iraq.** The experience of these operations reveals the heavy opportunity cost imposition on readiness and the core defence and deterrence mission set, something this model consciously avoids.

This is a political decision with defence implications. **Politically, the British government should accept that this is neither a core competency outside of limited areas of interest such as Northern Ireland, nor in the interests of the United Kingdom to find itself embroiled in costly conflicts.** A concomitant trade-off is that the United Kingdom will not have the capacity to support the United States if Washington finds itself in scenarios in the future. This does not preclude short-duration stabilisation or limited crisis management where British interests are directly engaged, such as non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) activities.

A changed role within the 'special relationship'

The approach outlined in this paper results in a Britain that has a new and different role in the special relationship with the United States. **This defence strategy will result in a United Kingdom that is less able to act as a routine hard-power partners in American-led interventions, should they materialise, outside of the Euro-Atlantic theatre.**

This is a conscious trade-off, but one that will reposition the United Kingdom within the special relationship in a more meaningful manner. Britain's value to the United States lies increasingly in its role as NATO's leading European maritime and enabling power in the North Atlantic and High North, helping to anchor the Euro-Atlantic while the US shifts more attention to the IndoPacific. Indeed, in developing a primarily Euro-Atlantic and maritime focus, the United Kingdom will provide the United States with a form of eastern flank defence to include the vital waterways, subsurface cables, and help develop and ensure the command of communications. This would, in the event of a crisis, allow the United States to reposition forward deployed forces towards other theatres. Backed by the United Kingdom's regional power projection capacity, the United Kingdom can also provide a backstop in the Mediterranean and Middle East, provided there is political alignment and shared goals and interests.

By delivering a clear strategic focus and operational prioritisation, and resourcing these activities accordingly, the United Kingdom will develop a more credible force and serve as a more reliable partner. Consolidating conventional ground forces in a smaller, but fully resourced and deployable manner will make the British Army more capable than its present incarnation. Ironically, this will also make the United Kingdom more credible within NATO and see London as a leading player within the alliance, and as a result a better partner for the United States (although this is not a central driver of this defence concept, merely a secondary benefit). This approach first supports British national interests, second provides a meaningful and credible contribution to

NATO, and finally makes Britain a more viable partner for the United States.

Critical enabling factors for a maritime-first strategy

Logistics, munitions, and sustainment

The conflict in Ukraine demonstrated that assumptions about the rate of consumption and the depth of munitions stockpiles were insufficient for modern conventional warfighting. **Conflicts of the future will demand not just deep stockpiles, but also the capacity to rapidly expand production of key weapons and the ability to shift industry from peacetime to wartime in a rapid manner.** Industrial surge capacity should be seen not as solely a function of bureaucratic administration or a 'nice-to-have', but a key component of deterrence. Additionally, through sea control the United Kingdom can ship and deliver more munitions to forward deployed forces and allies in the event of a conflict. Airborne logistics cannot match the volume of material delivered via ship.

In following the approach outlined in this paper, the United Kingdom will need to develop depth of maritime munitions, subsurface uncrewed systems to support crewed operations, deep stocks of air defence interceptors to support IAMD operations, and long-range precision strike assets (developed independently and in concert with partners such as Germany) to first support the deterrent mission, and then warfighting operations should the former fail. This is in addition to traditional munitions such as 155mm artillery and 120mm tank rounds, mortars, and small calibre ammunition.

The British government should adopt an inverse ten-year rule, where the assumption is (for planning purposes) that a war could well happen in the next decade and sufficient stocks of materials and munitions are necessarily commensurate with that risk.

Investing in autonomous and uncrewed systems today and at scale risks acquiring capabilities that will be obsolete by the time that they are deployed. The innovation and adaptation cycle between Russia and Ukraine is measured in weeks, not months or years. While a 155mm shell has its own shelf life, its utility is far more consistent than novel technologies like FPVs, the iteration of which rapidly ensures obsolescence. While this is somewhat offset by the software defined nature of many of these systems (e.g. updates can be pushed to operating systems to changing parameters such as angles of attack), there remains an inherent risk given systemic hardware limitations. To offset this risk the United Kingdom should shift to two acquisition strategies.

- 1. Purchasing key interoperable components at scale such as batteries, energetics, and solid-state motors around which evolving capabilities are designed.** This will support the ideas of spiral development and constant innovation. This should also seek to leverage, where possible, the software defined nature of many of these systems, as noted above.
- 2. Developing 'always on' manufacturing lines capable** of scaling production as and when needed, and seeking to leverage commercial-off-the-shelf technologies and dual use components. This will necessitate His Majesty's Government entering into long-term agreements with industry, but such agreements are necessary to provide industry the confidence needed to invest in the systems and production lines.

A specialised defence industrial base

This new maritime-first approach to British strategy delivers a focusing effect for the defence

industrial base (DIB). This leads with enhancing and expanding Britain's shipbuilding capacity and existing infrastructure. Beyond the construction of the vessels themselves is the supporting ecosystem and infrastructure necessary to deliver and sustain maritime operations.

The United Kingdom's approach to the DIB should prioritise innovation and technological development. This is done through sensible, smart, and indeed small bets across multiple British companies to see what works and what does not. This also necessitates confronting challenges facing British industry writ large, including high energy costs, excessive regulation, insufficient and inefficient capital allocation, and gaps in the skilled workforce. **This is a fundamental change in acquisition mindset.** This requires a willingness to accept that some bets will not result in outcomes or wins. Additionally, a willingness to recognise that some systems will become obsolete and will need to be phased out over time is necessary. Not every system or programme will survive the innovation cycle. Indeed, the government must accept and recognise that defence industrial policy is an instrument for specialisation and innovation, not merely a vehicle for keeping legacy programmes alive beyond their useful lives.

This also offers a framework for considering strategic dependencies and risks and continuing and pursuing sovereignty where appropriate. The nuclear enterprise is, naturally, one where external dependency beyond those which already exist (the United States) are not acceptable. **Greater dependency is, however, acceptable in areas such as joint deep strike development programmes or in GCAP, for example.** The United Kingdom will not, of course, outsource all its weapons production but should seek to develop specialisation where comparative advantages are available, and purchase off-the-shelf where possible.

An approach here is to consider three buckets:

1. Production of national and strategic importance;
2. Co-production where possible; and
3. Off-the-shelf purchases from allies and partners.

This three-way approach will see the United Kingdom develop a robust and specialised DIB that will offer comparative advantages within NATO and on the export market, allow for selective partnership with the United States and NATO allies, and maximise capability per investment. Co-production of long-range and deep-precision strike with Germany and Australia are emblematic of this second way.

Personnel generation and sustainment

The men and women of the military are the most important aspect of His Majesty's Armed Forces. Translating this truism into action requires resources and attention regardless of the strategic design the United Kingdom chooses to adopt. **The strategic approach outlined in this paper is skill-intensive—submariners, cyber professionals, electronic warfare experts, special operators, and engineers, etc. This more focused group will require greater investment and commitment from the services to the personnel, their families, and their post-service careers to ensure that recruitment targets are met and sustained.** This also necessitates creating an environment where service is an attractive option both through the benefits offered from the military and in valuing service amongst the broader political and societal landscape. For instance, prosecuting soldiers for actions taken under an existing legal framework simply because the politics have changed sets a dangerous precedent and serves to deter would-be service

members.²⁰

The emphasis here in the maritime domain requires the most significant shift in emphasis not for the Royal Navy specifically, but for the industrial base supporting the maritime industry. Facilities in Clyde, Barrow, Rosyth, Portsmouth, and South Wales, for example, will need increased resourcing and support to mobilise the industrial base and keep highly skilled and highly trained personnel. Creating a favourable and attractive environment for workers in these key industries and developing pathways for mid-career entry and temporary assignment, for example, and post-service pathways into key industries for service members would enhance the talent pool necessary for this strategy.

20 The Prosperity Institute has produced draft legislation designed to prevent precisely this. See Alexander Gray, *Warfare, Not Lawfare: A New Legal Framework for Military Operations* (London: Prosperity Institute, 2026). ([link](#))

5. How Maritime-first benefits Britain



Main points

- A maritime-first strategy would put the security, prosperity, and sovereignty of the British people ahead of discretionary overseas ambitions.
- Focused defence investment would strengthen homeland resilience, revive specialised industries and regional economies, and give Britain a leading role in European defence through NATO.
- Concentrating on Britain's comparative advantages would produce greater strategic clarity, credibility with allies, and selective global influence without repeating the overreach of 'Global Britain'.

The preceding chapters outlined a new maritime-first strategy for the United Kingdom, one that accepts a changing geostrategic environment, changing European defence landscape, and focuses on advancing Britain's interests first and foremost. **But what does this mean in practice?** How does a maritime-first strategy advance Britain's interests and benefit British society? This chapter sets out how the defence concept outlined in this paper benefits Britain's people, economy, and geopolitical position.

The maritime-first approach prioritises the security, prosperity and sovereignty of the United Kingdom above discretionary overseas ambitions and engagement. If the former is not secured, the latter is impossible and indeed reckless to pursue. This does not mean that the United Kingdom should not pursue its interests abroad or create conditions elsewhere which are beneficial for Great Britain. Rather, it is about affirming and acting on the most important role of the British Armed Forces to enable selective engagements overseas. **The idea of 'Global Britain' was more ambition than substance and risked overextending British national power in pursuit of vague multilateralism.** Equally, the United Kingdom does not and should not pursue American-style isolationism, elements of which are present in the current America First strategic approach.

Securing the British people and homeland

The primary responsibility of the British Armed Forces is the protection of the state and its citizens. This concept places that front and centre, ensuring that Newcastle is defended first, but still allowing the United Kingdom to maintain its obligations and forward deterrent posture in—for example—Narva, Estonia. Integrated, focused air and missile defence will offer layered protection for critical national infrastructure against adversary attacks. The protection of the broader concept of communications and development of resiliency will provide the British people confidence in power, telecommunications, and supporting infrastructure, which is fundamentally necessary for national and economic security. **A United Kingdom that is secure and well defended is a United Kingdom that is resilient and less vulnerable to adversary attack and coercion. A**

robust defence posture backed by both conventional and strategic deterrence means that adversaries must take the United Kingdom seriously. Indeed, deterrence by denial, punishment, and resilience, all of which are achievable under this concept affords London a greater freedom of action and movement than it might otherwise possess. A secure homeland is a prerequisite for any defence concept.

Reviving British industry and supporting regional prosperity

This concept leans into British competitive advantage and places British industry first, where possible. It looks at defence not as a cost centre but as a source of growth, innovation, and investment with benefits beyond just the Armed Forces. **Shipbuilding, nuclear submarine manufacturing, space-based and space-enabled systems development, artificial intelligence, and other critical technologies will directly benefit British industry.** These are areas in which the United Kingdom already has a strong foundation and on which it can build, providing high-quality, high-skill employment and spin-off technological and other benefits. Under this approach, defence spending is directed to areas of British competitive advantage, importing kit where necessary. An additional benefit is investment in key areas of the United Kingdom that have historically been neglected. Areas such as Clyde, Barrow, Rosyth, Portsmouth, South Wales, Midlands, Yorkshire, etc. will materially benefit from focused, long-term, investment, which will, ideally, offset some of the effects of de-industrialisation.

This concept also creates niche export opportunities. Much of defence, such as munitions and cheap air defence interceptors is increasingly commoditised. There is little to be gained by competing in this space. By focusing on high-end and specialised capabilities, beyond areas of immediate interest where dependencies are not tolerated, the United Kingdom can position itself as an exporter of choice, filling in gaps in NATO architectures and beyond. British firms can, as a result, gain new, and expand existing global market access while strengthening British defence.

A leading role in European defence on Britain's terms

This concept provides the United Kingdom with a clear role in European defence via NATO on the United Kingdom's terms. By specialising within the NATO framework and partnering on key defence industrial projects, this concept affords London greater flexibility for selective engagement. Britain becomes indispensable to core European defence and not a peripheral player, but on its terms. By maintaining engagement with NATO, JEF, and the bi- and multi-lateral defence agreements the United Kingdom retains full political control over its defence destiny and avoids European Union entanglement.

Leveraging British strengths for global relevance

This narrowed maritime-first concept does constrain the United Kingdom's capacity to conduct power projection on a significant scale, but it does mean that that engagement is more selective and targeted, and focused on British interests first. It deepens Britain's relations with key NATO allies first, selecting which operations and actions in which to become involved. These partnerships become not just about necessity, or ends in and of themselves, but about investing in British interests and prosperity. While focused, this does not mean that the United Kingdom is unable to respond to Falklands-like crisis scenarios, non-combatant evacuation operations, or security operations where core interests require defence. Rather, this is about

selective engagement.

This focused concept also means greater credibility within political and military circles in the United States. **As the United Kingdom develops more credible and more capable forces in the Euro-Atlantic, while retaining the capacity to backfill and backstop American support in Europe, Washington will be increasingly able to rebalance to the Pacific theatre of operations—its central strategic objective.** This does mean that the United Kingdom will be less able to participate in future counterinsurgency or low-intensity conflict operations, or foreign interventions, which will likely be welcomed by the British people. Indeed, Britain-first will shape the special relationship around shared core defence tasks as opposed to discretionary conflicts.

Providing strategic clarity

Above all else this concept provides strategic clarity for the British people on what the country's core defence interests are, what the Armed Forces are meant for, and how His Majesty's Government will defend the realm. This is vitally important for democratic consent and legitimacy. It answers fundamental questions that are somewhat tacit and assumed but are now clearly delineated in a manner that the average Briton can see, understand, and accept. It provides a roadmap for development against which Whitehall and Westminster are measured, and clarity of purpose for the British public. Such clarity is necessary for recruitment of personnel, support of the Armed Forces, and long-term backing for defence investment. Rhetorical support is insufficient; democratic buy-in from the British people is vital.

Conclusion



Main points

- Britain should adopt a neo-Corbettian strategy centred on homeland defence, maritime communications, Euro-Atlantic area control and denial, and a credible but limited land contribution to NATO.
- Strategic concentration requires rejecting unsustainable full-spectrum ambitions and accepting trade-offs in continental mass, global presence, and open-ended intervention.
- A focused maritime posture would make Britain more secure, credible, and useful to its allies while aligning defence investment with national interests, industrial capacity, and public consent.

This paper has advanced a concept for the United Kingdom that places the defence of the realm and the maritime domain at the centre of British defence strategy. It does so in recognition of a changing geostrategic environment, the strengths and weaknesses of the most recent Strategic Defence Review, and the need to accept that trade-offs are necessary, something that successive British governments have avoided. The result is a Britain-first, maritime-first, neo-Corbettian approach to defence: one centred on command of communications, area control and denial of maritime access to adversaries, the protection of the national base, limited but credible land contributions to NATO, and a sustained focus on the North Atlantic, High North, North Sea, and Northern Europe.

The British way of war proposed here is therefore neither a return to a Cold War force posture nor a continuation of the increasingly unsustainable aspiration of a globally oriented joint force. **Britain should not seek to replicate the land mass of continental allies, aim to maintain a routine heavy hard-power presence in every theatre, or retain force structures designed for open-ended stabilisation and counterinsurgency campaigns. Rather, it should seek to generate and deploy force from the maritime perimeter: defending the United Kingdom and its approaches first, securing Euro-Atlantic communications second, and third enabling NATO operations, contributing a serious but limited conventional land force.** Consequently, HMG will develop and retain the ability to act selectively where British interests require it.

This requires an Armed Forces that can generate a set of clear strategic effects. Britain must remain a secure and functional national base, able to protect its people, institutions, and the critical infrastructure from which it can generate national power. It must retain sufficient control of its home waters and the Euro-Atlantic approaches to prevent an adversary from isolating the United Kingdom, severing transatlantic reinforcement, or using maritime, cyber, air, and subsea disruption to coerce British decision-making. This force must also deter aggression through a combination of CAS-D, conventional long-range strike, prioritised air and missile defence, resilient command-and-control, special operations forces, and credible responses below the nuclear threshold. Deterrence is, as this paper has noted, not solely a defence responsibility, but must be backed by a whole-of-government and whole-of-society effort.

The paper accepts trade-offs that will doubtless be unwelcome in some quarters. Critics will argue that the proposed land contribution is too limited and places too much faith in European rearmament, that a renewed Euro-Atlantic focus represents retreat from Britain's global role, or that a more selective approach to intervention weakens the special relationship. These are valid concerns and should be treated seriously. **Yet the alternative—attempting to sustain a large continental army, global naval presence, high-end air power, amphibious theatre-entry capability, persistent Indo-Pacific posture, and open-ended intervention capacity simultaneously—would only perpetuate the existing problem. British forces, while highly capable, are expected to do too much with too little—a fact that the United Kingdom's adversaries and allies alike recognise.**

A more focused strategy will not leave Britain without an Army, a global role, or meaningful options abroad. It instead produces a more capable and credible, fully resourced, sustainable, and conventional land contribution to NATO. It preserves the ability to respond to selective crises. It, in turn, makes Britain a more useful ally by concentrating investment in the functions it can provide best. Britain's role would be to secure the maritime approaches, contribute to the defence of NATO's northern and eastern flanks, and support a stronger European pillar within a changing alliance.

This approach does assume that continental European allies will continue to invest in conventional mass. Germany, Poland, the Nordic states, and other frontline allies may not meet the maximalist targets they have set out for themselves. Nevertheless, an upward strategic trajectory is clear: European states are rearming, NATO is strengthening its regional plans, and the burden of land defence on the continent is becoming more widely distributed and increasingly European. Britain should welcome this development. A stronger European conventional force allows the United Kingdom to specialise in those maritime, undersea, deterrent, and enabling functions that are both most suited to its geography and most valuable to the alliance. In so doing, the British Armed Forces will become more capable and credible, and focused on British national interests, first.

The United Kingdom cannot and should not adopt a defence concept detached from its strategic geography, national interests, industrial capacity, and force-generation realities. It neither needs nor can it afford a Cold War force model with autonomous systems either bolted onto an inherited structure or standing in place of traditional platforms. It can, however, become a decisive maritime power in the North Atlantic, High North, North Sea, and Northern Europe. His Majesty's Armed Forces would become a serious contributor to NATO deterrence and defence, capable of protecting the British people and their interests without becoming overstretched by unsustainable and unresourced global commitments.

A Britain-first, maritime-first, neo-Corbettian strategy is therefore not a programme of retreat. It is a programme of strategic concentration. It would make Britain more secure at home, more credible in Europe, more useful to NATO (and the United States), and more capable of acting abroad when its interests genuinely demand it. It would align British defence policy with the defence of the realm, and in so doing create clearer priorities for investment and force design, while supporting national industry and resilience, and providing the British public with a more honest account of what their Armed Forces are for.

This is not a strategy born of fiscal constraint alone. Even if future governments were to increase

resources significantly, additional investment should only deepen the approach outlined in this paper, rather than recreate the illusion of full-spectrum global military power. The central choice facing His Majesty's Government is not between a strong Britain and a limited Britain. It is between a Britain that remains overstretched, under-resourced, and strategically unfocused, and one that accepts its responsibilities, understands and leverages its advantages, and concentrates power where it can make the greatest impact for the British people and British interests.

Annex A: A notional delivery plan for the new defence strategy



The defence strategy outlined in this paper will require difficult choices, an investment of considerable political capital, and a clear and focused communications campaign both within and across government but also with the British people. It represents not simply an adjustment of the defence margins, but a wholesale reprioritisation of resources towards a new strategic approach to defending the realm and pursuing Britain's interests regionally and globally. There are winners and losers, and strategic trade-offs. These are necessary if Britain is to maximise its power and retain credibility with allies and adversaries alike. Making do and mending, a quintessential British trait of the Second World War is no longer sufficient for the United Kingdom's place in the world or the strategic environment in which it exists. What follows is a notional implementation plan. It is not exhaustive, but illustrative of the actions necessary to achieve this generational shift in defence priorities.

- **Secure Cabinet-level buy-in and support:** a government implementing this strategy must state clearly that this is official *government* policy, not merely the preferences of the Ministry of Defence or specific services. The Secretary of State for Defence and the Chancellor of the Exchequer must agree in lockstep with the Prime Minister that this is the direction the country must take and ensure whole-of-defence and whole-of-government support for its implementation. Every cabinet minister must be able to articulate why and how this matters and what their respective departments will do to ensure the success of this approach.
- **Embed the strategy into national security policy:** beyond the political rhetoric and support noted above, other ministries must bake the defence strategy outlined in this paper into their planning assumptions and policy documents. This would include the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; Department for Business, Innovation, Science, and Trade; the National Armaments Directorate, and other ministries. Each piece of government must move in tandem to effect real and lasting change. Doing so will ensure that this strategy is treated as not simply a Ministry of Defence concept paper.
- **Produce a New Defence Investment Plan:** the Ministry of Defence must draft a New Defence Investment Plan (NDIP) that clearly defines the spending priorities necessary to implement this strategy. Each item of the NDIP must be directly tied to one of the principal mission tasks articulated in the strategy. This will avoid the NDIP becoming an unfunded wish list of systems and capabilities. More importantly, the NDIP must be informed by defence realities, not simply fiscal limitations. 11 Downing Street cannot articulate how much threat the Ministry of Defence can afford. Rather, and concomitantly with the previous point, the Ministry of Defence and the Chancellor of the Exchequer must speak with one voice.
- **Develop service implementation strategies:** the individual services should be tasked by the Minister with developing specific implementation strategies for how their organisations will meet this new defence strategy and align with the articulated tenets. The Minister's office must ensure that the services work towards the defined strategy, and not the inverse. Service

parochialism will be difficult, but necessary, to overcome.

- **Distil the strategic mission tasks into concepts of operation:** this task is primarily that of the services and requires taking the political guidance and articulated strategic mission tasks and translating them into concepts of 'how the United Kingdom will fight', and what force structure and design is necessary to accomplish the political objectives. This will inform what the services buy and where investment priorities are made.
- **Aligning procurement and the industrial base:** the government's greatest power lies in the purse. What the Ministry of Defence buys and how much it purchases sends the biggest and most lasting signal to industry. The private sector will not respond until it believes and has confidence in the government's commitment to this new approach. Issuing long-term contracts, cancelling and unwinding programmes that are no longer appropriate, and allocating resources will provide industry the signals needed to move forward on a new partnership with His Majesty's Government. Industry itself will need to develop a new compact with government, accepting that there will be winners and losers, that some programmes may not last, and that rapid iteration and innovation—not legacy and programmes of record—are the drivers of the day. Here too cross-government involvement is necessary to ensure that industry has a sufficiently skilled workforce to support increased defence demands and that a robust enough social contract exists where those workers will receive competitive benefits, housing, and other enticements to work on or near defence facilities.
- **Communicate the urgency to the British Public:** the present national discussion on defence has become skewed by hyperbole. Warnings that the United Kingdom could not defend itself against an invasion or would run out of ammunition in a matter of days are neither credible with the British people nor strategically accurate. The British people know defence is important but cannot articulate why or what the Armed Forces are meant to do. A government implementing this strategy must be candid with the British people, stating why defence matters, what the threats facing the United Kingdom are, and how previous approaches are insufficient to the challenge at hand. It must be transparent in the failings of previous defence strategies—not assigning blame—but recognising the systemic issues facing defence.
- **Define allied expectations and commitments:** the approach outlined in this paper will result in a more capable and more credible British Armed Forces, but it will also mean a changing role for British defence in the world. The government must articulate to its allies and partners what they can expect and when from the British Armed Forces, what missions it will be capable and incapable of doing, and how it will meet its existing obligations or how those obligations may need to change. More importantly, the government must show what it is doing, not just tell. For too long the British government has stated what its Armed Forces can do without sufficient understanding of the limitations of those forces, leaving a credibility gap that requires repair.

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