



***THE UK INTEGRATED REVIEW AND
INTEGRATED DETERRENCE***

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The much-awaited release of Britain’s [updated](#) Integrated Review (IR2023)—a “refresh” since the 2021 [iteration](#) (IR2021)—has many in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific now trying to assess UK intent and capability in the region. The paper does go some way to addressing concerns that UK domestic politics would pull the ground from underneath “the Tilt” before it had even begun. The region is described as “Inextricably linked” with the security of the Euro-Atlantic, though this strategic logic is compelling, the operational follow-through bears some scrutiny.

So, what is the United Kingdom security posture in the Indo-Pacific and how can it meet the theatre-resourcing demands made by current geopolitical realities and current capacity?

First, there is a superior strategic logic to the idea of linkage between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific as part of a broader construct the “global commons and rules-based international order.” This framework promotes the idea that the two regions—and Russian and Chinese efforts to destabilize and dominate those regions—are part of a broader

geopolitical struggle. The common thread of Russian and Chinese authoritarian systems also reaffirms this conceptualization as does their growing political and military alignment and intention “to remake [the order] in their image” (IR2023). This framework is likewise found in the 2022 US [National Security Strategy](#) and the 2022 [Japanese National Security Strategy](#).

At slight variance to this compelling logic, is the debate about resourcing and operational concerns in Europe in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Europe. In both the United States and United Kingdom, there are those experts who believe that London’s focus should be Europe and that attention towards the Indo-Pacific is a “distraction.” Some of these voices are even official, as for example, that of US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin [stated](#) in July 2021: “If, for example, we focus a bit more here [in Asia], are there areas that the United Kingdom can be more helpful in other parts of the world.” This view has been a constant refrain by Labour Shadow Defense Secretary John Healey who [stated](#) that “Alliances with like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific are important. We can contribute strongly with technology, capability, diplomacy, to the Indo-Pacific, but there needs to be a realism about military commitments into the Indo-Pacific. Our armed forces are ill-served by leaders who pretend that Britain can do everything, everywhere.”

In all fairness, the [IR2021](#) or [IR2023](#) both make clear that the United Kingdom’s prioritization will be of the Euro-Atlantic—the “region of primary and overriding importance to UK interests – where the build of...efforts would be focused through NATO.” Furthermore, Secretary of Defence Austin’s view does not preclude the sort of diplomatic, economic, technological, and security cooperation that the United Kingdom is already doing in the Indo-Pacific. Of note: the Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2021, [calls for](#) an “engaged Europe” as one of its strategic means, and states that the United States will “bring our Indo-Pacific and European partners in novel ways, including through the AUKUS partnership.”

At its heart, this is a disconnect between two different theatres and two different types of threat, posing different operational challenges. In Europe, the threat

is largely about annexation of national territory by a revanchist Russia and the possibility of a land war in Ukraine that could spill over into NATO-member territory. Few believe that it is about the future architecture of Europe. In contrast, it is more about the regional maritime system and its importance to the global system in the Indo-Pacific. Admiral John Aquilino, Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command in October 2021 made this clear when he visited the United Kingdom and [called](#) the Indo-Pacific the “defining security landscape of the 21st Century.” Noting the centrality of the region’s maritime trade flow “every day, half of the entire world’s container cargo and 70% of ship-borne energy supply flows through this area. The most important message I can send...is how vital the Indo-Pacific is to the future prosperity and security of Europe and global cooperation.”

Is the United Kingdom therefore set to play a role in an integrated deterrence vis a vis China? The jury is still out, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, though the Tilt appears to have been achieved and now the region is to become a “permanent pillar” of UK foreign policy. With the exception of AUKUS and GCAP, which are new since IR2021, much of the Tilt has been achieved through diplomatic and technical/economic agreements rather than through defense or security means. There have been modest increases in the United Kingdom military presence in the region, such as the two naval patrol vessels, and arguably the AUKUS/GCAP agreements are the headline deliverables that will see decades of engagement in the region. IR2023 emphasizes the United Kingdom approach in the region to be via deepening relationships with allies and partners or soft power. The United Kingdom has widened its security and defense network across the Indo-Pacific over the past decade and appears to be trying to deepen this network now. Not much can be drawn from IR2023 until the Defence Command Paper is out—reportedly not due for release until June 2023.

If deterring China is the goal what should the United Kingdom be doing to help achieve this? The United

Kingdom is not about to deploy vast numbers of troops, ships, or aircraft to the region especially whilst the war in Ukraine persists. But the United Kingdom could use its footprint across the Indo-Pacific to better support a coordinated deterrence plan with other allies or partners in the region.

France and the United Kingdom have already agreed a plan to coordinate carrier group deployments, which could be a signpost for the integrating effect the United Kingdom brings. With the AUKUS announcement there are likely to be more submarine deployments to the region including the establishment of a trilateral submarine task force. What is lacking for the region is any form of security architecture in which allies and partners can discuss issues and coordinate responses or contribute forces. Evidently this would not include China and by developing an integrated security structure it builds a better integrated deterrence effect where allies and partners are stronger together.

The United Kingdom could expand its experience of establishing maritime Combined Task Forces (CTF) that have been successful in the Arabian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and Malacca Straits¹. All these CTFs have included a mix of international partners and proved to be successful in deterring illicit activity, strengthening maritime security and reassuring region or international communities. London could establish something similar for the Indo-Pacific, or even several across the region, where partner nations can come together to police the increasingly crowded volatile seas and airspaces of the region? While the United Kingdom can help to establish this/these HQs in the region they would be likely not be led by the United Kingdom, and they shouldn’t be. The United Kingdom could provide the backbone, providing a “socket” for the United Kingdom to “plug” into when UK forces were deployed in the region, but more importantly bring like-minded partners together to improve security across the region. The byproduct being a more coherent deterrent strategy toward the region.

¹ In the Arabian Gulf is Combined Maritime Forces including CTF 150, 151 & 152. EUNAVFOR which used to be based out of the UK

countering piracy in Somalia and the Indian Ocean. Based out of Singapore was the International Fusion Centre to counter piracy in the Malacca Straits.

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