



## ***THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE UK'S SDR FOR ITS INDO-PACIFIC POSTURE***

BY DR. JOHN HEMMINGS

*Dr. John Hemmings (john. @geostrategy.org.uk) is Deputy Director at the Council on Geostrategy in London and Senior Advisor at Pacific Forum.*

The launch of the UK's [Strategic Defence Review](#) has finally set down a clear direction for the UK's strategic posture for at least a parliament, perhaps longer. The most instrumental element in the paper is the decision to focus on the Euro-Atlantic as the priority region. This was already understood, but there has been at least two decades of the UK flirting with an East of Suez strategy. This included development of a robust defence attaché network in Southeast Asia, the long courtship of China—and then India—for growth, and the resurgence of UK military assets to the region in the name of defending maritime sea lanes and a “free and open” Indo-Pacific. While it's true that this SDR was written by externals, led by Lord George Robertson, Dr. Fiona Hill, CMG, and Gen. Sir Richard Barrons, the Labour government has already stamped its seal of approval by accepting all 62 recommendations. So what exactly does it say about the UK's “Indo-Pacific strategy?”

Well, the document is a realization that the US “[Pivot](#)” to the Indo-Pacific region is here to stay. This was made clear after the Biden administration re-released an [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) in 2022 to put its stamp on the Trump strategy of 2019. Both strategies began with the starting point that the United States as an “Indo-Pacific power” or “Indo-Pacific nation.” While resources and political attention have—at times—remained stubbornly centered around the Middle East and CENTCOM and with Europe and EUCOM, the arrival of Elbridge Colby—a one-time Pacific Forum Young Leader—on the strategic scene in the United

States has for now crowned the Indo-Pacific Pivot as the US' priority region. The rise of China in this region, and the shift of political, military, and economic weight from Europe to Asia has cemented this shift. Colby's ratification as Undersecretary of Defense for Policy has also added an explicit message to the Europeans: the dribbling of small amounts of assets to the Indo-Pacific is unnecessary; the United States would infinitely prefer that European powers—France, Germany, and the UK—focus on the Euro-Atlantic and deal with Russia.

The SDR wisely accommodates this resource imperative, while still providing a place for UK interests and support to the US and its allies in the region. If one looks at the number of times “Indo-Pacific” is mentioned in the document (17), it is notable that this is down from a high of 32 mentions in the 2021 Integrated Review. Still, it is still better than the [Strategic Defence Review of 1998](#) or the 2010 [Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), documents which mentioned “Asia” five times and two times respectively. The 2025 SDR states that NATO-first does not mean NATO-only, putting the list of priorities as Euro-Atlantic, Middle East, and Indo-Pacific in that order. It states “the Indo-Pacific is strategically important to the UK as a global economic and political powerhouse and arena of increasing geopolitical tension.” It notes the strong partnerships the UK in the region—ASEAN, Australia, Brunei, Japan, India, Indonesia, Nepal, New Zealand, and Pakistan come in for special mention—and of course, China.

The SDR's position on China is probably closest to that of the UK Ministry of Defence and—sadly—does not reflect broader opinion across government in Whitehall. China is a “sophisticated and persistent threat,” which behaves aggressively in the South China Sea and has escalated tensions in the Taiwan Strait. It notes the fact that China has supported Russia in its invasion of Ukraine and that the US-China relationship will be a “key factor” in global security. It also notes the threats provided by Beijing's military build-up, nuclear modernization, and technological and cyber capabilities and recommends the maintenance of UK-China military-to-military communications. Given that US-China mil-to-mil

relations are extremely limited now and constantly under pressure from China over US arms sales to Taiwan, this might prove a helpful channel in time. Notably, it recognizes that most of the UK's adversaries will likely field Chinese technology—an important observation in its own right.

The SDR's integrated approach towards the Indo-Pacific region is consistent with the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, and consistent with the overall security interests of its closest partners, Japan and Australia, who are rapidly becoming the more important partners of choice across a number of different metrics. First, both are key partners in intelligence-sharing, both work closely with the United States to demonstrate deterrent capability in military exercises in the region, and both are defence industrial partners of choice. With Japan, the UK is developing the meteor, a joint new air-to-air missile (JNAAM) and the Global Combat Air Programme (with Italy), though this latter effort is under pressure. With Australia, there is even more by way of “production deterrence” in the form of the AUKUS submarine and technology programs. The rotation of UK Astute-class submarines to HMAS Stirling, in Australia, planned as early as 2027 will be an immense boon to deterrence and warfighting capability.

So what's missing from the SDR? Well, with respect to the authors, there are a few things: The recent murmurings of disquiet about a lack of progress in AUKUS Pillar 2 is an issue. London and Canberra now need to press upon newly arrived Trump officials, their thoughts on the blockage and what can be done to expedite things at the resourcing, regulatory, and organizational level. This needs to be done at a time when the White House is shifting the US trade environment, so this will be difficult. In addition, the UK MOD needs to think about what posture it needs to “surge” military forces into the region in a crisis. The MOD needs to provide options and these range from inter-changeability exercises for UK assets visiting the region to developing a more mature presence in INDOPACOM—through a mid-size consulate in Honolulu run at the ambassadorial level by someone with close links to MOD. They include joining the Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience—if this has not already occurred—and

supporting “production deterrence”. It might mean co-production on long-range munitions in the wide expanse of the Pacific. And finally, it needs to develop—alone or in tandem with the US—hubs for maintenance, repair, and operations (MRO) so that it can operate at the long-distances required by the operational environment.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*