

The Integrated Review Refresh: A Confident, Pragmatic Britain Emerges

The 'refresh' of the Integrated Review (IR) was born in the scrum of the Conservative Party leadership contest over the summer last year, as candidates challenged one another to declare their stripes on national security. The review of the Review then began under the Truss Government, and was kept in train after the transition to the Sunak Government. The original plan for the refresh was to publish a new version of the Review quickly as possible, opening up only the limited suite of areas in which the greatest degree of change had taken place – namely, China, Russia and Ukraine, Europe and energy resilience.

This approach in part reflected the belief that, despite the geopolitical turbulence over the past two years, the IR framework had largely been proven to be sound when tested in the field. Moreover, it would be important to show a degree of consistency and predictability in British foreign policy after an unusually dynamic decade. In the end, the refresh has taken around six months and has struck a balance between maintaining the original foundations of the Review, and pushing the UK to be more explicit, sharper and confident in its choices.

The original Integrated Review was a horizon scan of the international landscape in which Britain's choices were being shaped. The refresh acknowledges that we are now living in this projected reality.

Its title, 'Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World' highlights the role that external pressures have played in shaping British priorities, and the need for flexibility and vigilance in our foreign policy culture. The contested and volatile forces are not only external, of course – our foreign policy is being forged in a time of constrained resources. It is the need to address an increasingly difficult geopolitical climate while state finances are under considerable pressure that has formed the essential backdrop against which the refresh has been conducted. Crucially, the choice has been made to avoid the pull of turning inwards, instead pursuing our core national interest alongside a "higher interest" of shaping an open, stable international order.

Below are several of the key areas that have been reshaped in the updated Integrated Review and what they reflect about the current nature of British foreign policy-making.

UK-China Relations

Much of the discussion around IR refresh has centred on the question of whether the UK Government would choose to describe China as a 'threat'. China has, to this point, been described in official terms as a "systemic challenge", as presenting "risks" and as a "competitor". In the end, the decision was taken to outline with clarity many of the ways in which contemporary China challenges our values and interests, and the risks we perceive in terms of its intentions towards Taiwan, but to not describe the nation itself as a threat.

It is self-evident from the IR refresh that HMG has gone on a journey on the Chinese Communist Party, and is now considerably more attuned to the risks of coercion, interference and competition. There is still a long road to go before the UK can be fully confident in its defensive framework, and many areas need urgent attention. Language is hugely important, but ultimately, it will be the policies and legislation put in place that will

determine our sovereignty and security. Moreover, there is a need to ensure we are aligned closely with the terminology of our allies, in order to thwart the CCP's efforts to 'divide and conquer'.

The major policy and framing shift on China in the IR refresh is the new emphasis placed on economic security, which is an area in which both HMG and the British people perceive concrete risks to the national interest. Tackling economic security presents a machinery-of-government challenge, as it cuts across many portfolios and commands unwieldy parameters. There are, for example, clear economic security dimensions in the competition around vital technologies such as semiconductors, as well as many areas of political interference, cyber-attacks, and the potential disruption to global markets wrought by geopolitical choices.

It is true that many of the policy responses required to effectively defend the UK's economic security would see the Government moving into uncomfortable terrain, including starting to think about the shape of a national security-led industrial policy. This will require a cultural shift that is unlikely to be achieved overnight. The mention of an Economic Deterrence Initiative also suggests an eye to possible sanctions in the event of an escalation of Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific – a scenario for which extensive planning has been undertaken within Government since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The publication of the refreshed Review in Budget week means the document is accompanied by some tangible financial commitments and policy initiatives. One of the more intriguing aspects of the IR is the pledge to launch a China Capabilities programme in HMG, which would enhance the Government's Mandarin language skills and diplomatic expertise on China. The announcement of a new National Protective Security Authority in Mi5 signals that the Government understands that there will need to be a whole-of-society approach to our economic resilience, and that businesses are increasingly going to find themselves in the crosshairs of our national security. The Government's Critical Minerals Strategy will also be 'refreshed', with a focus on securing access to critical technology components.

AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific

The decision to bring together the AUKUS submarines announcement and the publication of the Integrated Review was by no means a coincidence. The Sunak Government's approach to foreign policy has a clear eye on the Treasury, and there is an instinct to ensure our rhetoric matches our policy commitments. While it is never explicitly described as such, AUKUS puts the meat on the bones of a more active hard power posture towards an increasingly risk-tolerant China. The fusion of these two major foreign policy initiatives allows the Government to show it is putting its money where its mouth is, and sends a powerful message that a crucial part of our national resilience will be forged through our alliances.

AUKUS also provides a tangible initiative to underpin our Indo-Pacific presence, and will be the single largest project in the new defence cash injection. Gone is the language of the 'tilt', as we are now normalising and "consolidating" our role in the region. Yet, it's plain to see that there has been a rebalancing of our hard power ambitions due to the Russian invasion

of Ukraine, which is testing the British defence machine to its limits. The UK Government will continue to prioritise two strategic theatres, and increasingly seeks to conceptualise these in terms of their symbiosis. AUKUS delivers a solid commitment to the Indo-Pacific security order, while enabling the UK to remain the leading European military power as a live war unfolds. The remainder of our enhanced presence in Asia is likely to be constituted through our focus on trade – with CPTPP remaining a top priority – as well as investments in development and climate financing.

Russia and Ukraine

The Integrated Review did not predict Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, but it did make the right call on describing Russia as the number one security threat. This posture of institutional alertness allowed the UK to mobilise quickly when British and American intelligence became increasingly explicit about Russia's malign intentions, which put us in a unique position to provide a robust and agile degree of support to Ukraine from the outset. Much planning has taken place in HMG over recent months to forecast the possible future scenarios for the conflict, which threatens to become entrenched and protracted. The IR makes clear that the UK will be standing alongside Ukraine, without any ambiguity, and will be confidently leaning into its role to support the country's reconstruction, its humanitarian needs, and the investigation of Russian war crimes.

The war in Ukraine dramatically alters the decision-making landscape for British foreign policy and defence. It will consume a large proportion (£1.9 billion) of the £5 billion defence spending injection to be announced in the Budget on Wednesday, with the funds going directly to bolster our munitions supplies. In addition, the Review commits to upholding the more-than £2 billion of expenditure the UK has made in the first year of the conflict towards Ukraine. It is expected that a new Defence Command Paper may follow in the Summer.

The UK's Role and Relationship in Europe

The refreshed Integrated Review captures the dramatic shift that has taken place over the past two years in the nature and tone of the UK's relationships with both European nations and the European Union. This has partly been driven by the war in Ukraine, which has simultaneously highlighted Britain's vital contribution to European security, as well as focusing minds across the region on the need to project unity against Russian aggression. It also reflects the shared acceptance of the need for a more constructive form of regional engagement on areas of collective importance, such as energy provision, business investment, defence cooperation, research and innovation. The result is a more substantial focus on the UK's geographical neighbourhood, and a reassertion of its primary importance in our resilience planning.

Rather than simply highlighting several important relationships in Europe, as the first IR did, the refresh makes an explicit commitment to enhancing the UK's collaboration across the entire region, including with the EU institutions. The Windsor Framework agreement on the Northern Ireland Protocol, the UK-France Summit, and the launch of the European Political Community – which Britain has pledged to host next year – have been transformative in reshaping the dynamics, and a confident post-Brexit Britain is clearly more comfortable to engage on the terms of mutual respect it now perceives.

Energy Resilience

The UK has carved out a world-leading position in climate diplomacy and in public-private initiatives to support the net-zero transition. This both reflects and shapes a widespread and enduring commitment from the Government, business and the British people to address the consequences of climate change and grasp the economic opportunities of clean energy. The war in Ukraine and the ensuing crisis around the cost of gas, oil and other traditional energy sources has, however, risked derailing the project to embrace renewables.

The IR refresh reaffirms the UK's commitment to climate action, but more practically brings together the climate and energy resilience policy areas in a harmonious ecosystem. Rather than diluting the enabling environment Government has provided to the net-zero transition, this sharpened integration should in fact facilitate greater political and policy attention on what has become a security and economic issue, as well as a moral imperative.

Science and Technology

The first Integrated Review set out an ambition for the UK to become a science and technology "superpower". While the challenges around state finances and issues with regional research cooperation have presented some obstacles towards achieving this objective, it remains a central organising principle in HMG – neatly bringing together the national security and economic growth agendas. Recent machinery-of-government changes, including the launch of a dedicated Science and Technology department, indicate the Prime Minister has been persuaded of the importance of this policy area. In this endeavour, he has the backing of the British people: my focus groups and surveys with the British people have made clear that science and technology are seen to be core national strengths, and there is a high degree of buy-in for the Government scaling up its investments in these areas.

As with the economic security agenda, one of the principal struggles will be to ensure this department and the broader science agenda is fully integrated across Whitehall – working in lockstep with national security teams, and claiming a strategic stake in projects with a strong technological component, such as AUKUS. The pledged expansion in the refresh of the College for National Security curriculum – which was based on an Australian model but has yet to match its influence – should be harnessed to deliver these capabilities. With proper resourcing, it is in science and technology that we may be able to see the Government's integration agenda begin to reap tangible dividends, with domestic and international budgets and personnel working cohesively together.