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DOES BRITANNIA RULE?

«Global Britain» and the Geopolitics of the United Kingdom after Brexit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the years to come UK foreign policy will be based upon the concept of «Global Britain», extensively used in recently released government documents. This paper aims to provide an insight centred on a threefold research topic: official texts and statements, reactions that the concept elicited, geopolitical contexts wherein it is supposed to be put in place.
- The announced tilt to the Indo-Pacific will be likely put into effect in terms of trade cooperation, since power projection would not be welcomed by ASEAN countries, whereas joining the QUAD appears unlikely and the confrontation with China requires a multilateral approach within the Five Eyes alliance.
- The Euro-Atlantic region will remain the pivot of the UK's defence posture, geared toward the maritime containment of Russia from the Baltic Sea to the Arctic, but also to safeguarding the Union challenged by Scotland's separatism.
- As a result, «Global Britain» displays no post-Brexit one-sided adventurism, but rather the complex and sometimes contradictory reshaping of a new multilateralism within the Anglosphere, Commonwealth and NATO. ■



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GLOSSARY

- CPC: Communist Party of China
- DCP: Defence Command Paper
- FONOPs: Freedom of Navigation Operations
- FVEY: Five Eyes
- HMNB: Her Majesty's Naval Base
- IR: Integrate Review of Security, Defence Development and Foreign Policy
- LRG: Littoral Response Group
- MROSS: Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance Ship
- OFCOM: Office of Communications
- QUAD: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
- SNP: Scottish National Party
- UNCLOS: United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea
- V/STOL: Vertical/Short Take Off and Landing



1. The Integrated Review and its Reception

On March 16 2021, the British government published its long-awaited Integrated Review of Security, Defence Development and Foreign Policy (henceforth, Integrated Review or IR)¹, followed by the paper «Defence in a Competitive Age» (henceforth, Defence Command Paper or DCP), presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Defence². These two documents, pivoted to the notion of «Global Britain», aim to represent the building blocks of London's repositioning worldwide after its withdrawal from the European Union. It seems that the first time that notion was launched dates back to 2016, when the then-Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson sought to depict the role of the United Kingdom «not just as a link or a bridge between Europe and America», but as a country running «a truly global foreign policy»³.

Since then the idea of Global Britain has been circulating not only amongst local pundits or political representatives, but also in other countries deemed adversaries or competitors of the UK. For instance, in 2020 the European Institute of Russian Academy of Science released a detailed paper upon the perspectives of British foreign policy, entitled «Global Britain at the Dawn of Brexit», with an in-depth analysis of its risks and opportunities⁴. Previously, in 2019, British think tank Policy Exchange issued a report entitled *Making Global Britain Work* in the framework of its «Britain in the world» initiative⁵. Likewise, the Henry Jackson Society in London set out its «Global Britain Programme» to outline all possible meanings and the scope of implementation of that notion. However, the main

The historian John Bew, chosen by Boris Johnson to oversee the drafting of the “Integrated Review”, is believed to be the brain behind the idea of “Global Britain” that has been circulating since at least 2016

feature of IR lies elsewhere. As reported by «Politico», the major contributor behind the brainchild is the Director of the Centre for National Strategy at King's College London, the historian John Bew chosen by Boris Johnson to oversee the drafting of the document⁶. The end result is a paper written by numerous and

anonymous authors, amongst whom Bew is believed to have played the central «synthesizing» role. The appointment of an historian to handle such a task, quite unusual by the British yardsticks, is telling about the willingness to offer a perspective based upon not only technical data, but also outlining an overall vision consistent with national consciousness and traditions.

1 *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>. All references to the text will be henceforward made by indicating the capital initials IR.

2 *Defence in a Competitive Age*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-in-a-competitive-age/defence-in-a-competitive-age-accessible-version> All references to the text will be henceforward made by indicating the capital initials DCP (Defence Command Paper).

3 Boris Johnson, *Beyond Brexit: a Global Britain*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/beyond-brexit-a-global-britain>

4 K. A. Godovanjuk, “Global'naja Britania” v predverii Brekzita, <https://www.instituteofeurope.ru/images/uploads/doklad/373.pdf>

5 *Making Global Britain Work. 8 Ideas for Revitalising UK Foreign Policy for the Post-Brexit Age*, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Britain-in-the-World.pdf>

6 Charlie Cooper, *The Man Who Knows What ‘Global Britain’ Means*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/john-bew-global-britain-uk-eu/>

Nevertheless, judging by an overview of open sources, it seems that both the IR and DCP have sparked more criticism than support in media outlets as well as amongst defence and security experts. «The Guardian», for example, claims that the IR reveals a basic lack of realism since the announced resources are not tailored to its ambitions⁷. The inconsistency between the flaunted anti-Russian stance and the real wherewithal to face the Kremlin is at the core of another commentary published by «The Spectator»⁸. Other authors went further, arguing the IR unveils «the strategic confusion which arises from the Brexit decision», since it gathers a huge amount of pompous and contradictory wishful thinking without outlining neither a hierarchy amongst its purposes nor a thorough plan to achieve them⁹.

The attainability of many announced tasks appears to be the major sticking point of the debate amongst British and American think tanks. According to different analysis published by the International Institute of Security Studies (IISS), the IR falls short of expectations insofar as it does not explain how to carry out most of its goals. The DCP, albeit not devoid of interesting aspects (as the focus on naval military procurement and the increase in the nuclear-warheads stockpile), is equally marked by vagueness and implicit constraints¹⁰. On the contrary, the chair of the Royal Institute of Security Studies (RUSI) provided a more positive assessment of the Review, emphasising its focus on technology and soft power, as well as its commitment to internationalism¹¹. In turn, the Council of Geostrategy, a recently born think tank, singled out five «key innovations»: embracing the Euro-Atlantic's interconnectivity with the Indo-Pacific projection; commitment to an open international order; establishing a dynamic posture to lead in collective security; embracing the «sovereign» democracy and re-establishing technological leadership¹².

Across the pond, «Bloomberg» issued a commentary displaying a quite sceptical overview about the Global Britain concept in itself¹³, while «Foreign Affairs» hosted an article by high EU experts criticizing the IR for having neglected or belittled Europe and EU countries as crucial partners for the UK¹⁴. Some American analysts and former military officers expressed their concerns for the announced cut-in of the personnel of the British Army and its negative impact on the bilateral or international cooperation¹⁵. The «National

The “Integrated Review”, issued on March 16, 2021, has sparked arguments amongst English and American pundits, mostly due to its alleged gap between ambitions and resources

7 Martin Kettle, *Like Brexit, Johnson's Vision of 'Global Britain' is an Idea not a Policy*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/17/brexit-boris-johnson-global-britain-defence-review>

8 Jade McGlynn, *Boris's Russia Review Will Delight Putin*, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/boris-s-russia-review-will-delight-putin>

9 Richard Basset, *Does the Integrated Review Make Sense?* <https://fedtrust.co.uk/does-the-integrated-review-make-sense/>

10 Douglas Barrie, Ben Barry, Nick Childs, *Can the UK Deliver on its Bold Ambitions for a Global Military Presence?*, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/03/uk-global-military-presence-integrated-review> ; Douglas Barrie, Ben Barry, Henry Boyd, Nick Childs, *The UK's New Model Forces*, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/03/uk-defence-command-paper>.

11 James Roger, *5 ways forward for Global Britain*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-ways-forward-for-global-britain/>

12 <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/the-integrated-review-five-key-innovations/>

13 Theresa Raphael, *Boris Johnson Finally Tells Us What "Global Britain" Means*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-03-17/integrated-review-what-s-really-driving-britain-s-indo-pacific-tilt>

14 Jeremy Shapiro, Nick Witney, *The Delusions of Global Britain*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2021-03-23/delusions-global-britain>

15 Andrew Chuter, *Who are the Winners and Losers in Britain's New Defense Review?* <https://www.defensenews.com/>

Interest» allowed space to two opposite standpoints: the former reading between the lines a renowned and positive drift towards ancient British allies in the Anglosphere, the latter slamming the IR's «grand strategic sin of mismatching ambitions and resources»¹⁶.

Where do such mutually incompatible assessments stem from? The IR is undoubtedly a densely written document. One can read it in many ways, due to its inherent flexibility and to an extent its ambiguity as well. It has been drafted against the backdrop of the global pandemic and the thorny agreement with EU about the customs procedures, while in the United States a new President, less close to Boris Johnson than Donald Trump was, took office. As a result, in an open though contradictory manner, the IR reveals the ambition of drawing from the British maritime tradition, cautiously eschewing any formal reference to its colonial past but in some ways recovering the idea of «ruling the waves» that once actually made Britain «global». Conversely, it would be naïve to believe that official documents speak for themselves, by simply itemizing the tasks and providing all details to fulfil them.

In fact, a publicly available doctrine can serve different purposes and be addressed to many audiences. Toward the domestic one, any government understandably tries to legitimise itself before public opinion and targeted sectors. With reference to its allies, instead, it has to confirm its reliability as a partner sometimes sending them divergent messages. Toward the competitors and the adversaries, eventually, it is often necessary to find a balanced approach between steadfast warnings and deceptive declarations. It turns out quite tricky to carry out all these tasks simultaneously and successfully. In the following pages, we are going to try to understand some plausible evolutions of British foreign policy in the years to come, by paralleling the official statements with the reactions they have spawned amongst involved countries and, what's more, focusing on the geopolitical contexts wherein that Global Britain strategy is supposed to be put in place.

2. Tilt to the Indo-Pacific or Bulwark of Euro-Atlantic Defence?

One of the most disputed points of the IR is the salience attached to the Indo-Pacific region as a future area of interest for the United Kingdom, without ruling out military and security engagement. The IR describes it as follows:

In the decade ahead, the UK will deepen our engagement in the Indo-Pacific, establishing a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country. The Indo-Pacific region matters to the UK: it is critical to our economy, our security and our global ambition to support open societies. [...] At least 1.7 million British citizens live across the region and our trading relationships continue to grow. In the decades to come it will be the crucible for many of the most pressing global challenges – from climate and biodiversity to maritime security and geopolitical competition linked to rules and norms¹⁷.

More precisely, this tilt to the Indo-Pacific will focus on nine areas, ranging from trade agreements with Australia, New Zealand and India to becoming an ASEAN Dialogue Partner, from

[global/europe/2021/03/22/who-are-the-winners-and-losers-in-britains-new-defense-review/](https://www.bbc.com/news/global-europe-2021-03-22/who-are-the-winners-and-losers-in-britains-new-defense-review/)

16 Nick Danby, *Boris Johnson's 'Global Britain' Misses the Mark*, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/boris-johnson%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%99global-britain%E2%80%99-misses-mark-181494>

17 IR, pp. 66.

strengthening defence and security cooperation (especially in the maritime domain) with its FPDA partners to building cyber security capacity and strengthening supply chain resilience of critical goods and raw materials. At the same time, «the Euro-Atlantic region will remain critical to the UK's security», whence key priorities such as the restatement of British commitment to leadership in NATO, the improvement of the interoperability with Euro-Atlantic allies, the enforcement of the ability to manage and de-escalate a multi-domain crisis¹⁸. As many authors have remarked, the Indo-Pacific is mentioned 32 times within the text, whereas the Euro-Atlantic region appears only 15 times, so questions have been raised about how the commitment towards the former actually outweighs the latter.

Questions have been raised about the real priority between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic

The structure wherein the United Kingdom can and probably will do more is represented by the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), gathering 10 South-Asian countries with an overall gross domestic product over the last years around of US\$3 dollars, expected to double by 2030. Indeed, the rapprochement with this organization has progressed hand in hand with Brexit negotiations. On January 15 2020, London established its official mission to ASEAN in Jakarta, which is added to the already existing UK-ASEAN Business Council. Becoming a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN and thereafter joining a free trade agreement constitutes an essential end for Great Britain's economy after Brexit, but no few hurdles lie along the way. First, ASEAN has put in place a moratorium for new Dialogue Partnership, the last admission dating back to the 1990s. Secondly, the organisation is equally interested in a free trade agreement with the European Union, which will likely be prioritized relative to the UK. Thirdly, and most importantly, many ASEAN countries are sceptical and even opposed to Britain's security involvement in the Indo-Pacific, so that UK military commitment in the area sounds at odds with a fruitful implementation of the economic partnership¹⁹.

In this respect, as we have seen, the IR names also the FPDA (Five Power Defence Arrangements), a set of multilateral defence agreements the UK has with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore which just this year turns 50. This alliance (maybe one of the less known defence pacts in the world) represents a framework gathering Great Britain with some of its former colonies, and commits its members to a mutual consulting in case of an attack against Malaysia and Singapore. The IR gives only a fleeting mention to FPDA, but in late 2020 Defence Ministers of member countries released a joint statement for its 50th anniversary, restating its relevance to regional security of South Asia. Heretofore, her Majesty's Armed Forces can rely upon a military garrison in Brunei and a naval support facility in Singapore. It remains to be seen how concretely this presence can be increased and the overall FPDA reinforced without affecting the successful dialogue with ASEAN.

Moreover, it is important to note the IR contains no reference to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the strategic consulting group gathering US, India, Japan and Australia, deemed a counterweight to China's rise in the Indo-Pacific and the most significant regional security project. Launched in 2007 and revitalised under the Trump Administration, the QUAD has regain attention thanks to its first virtual official meeting held in early 2021. On March 16, the four QUAD countries issued a joint statement, named «the spirit of the QUAD» and centred on the notion of «open rules-

¹⁸ IR, pp. 25, 72.

¹⁹ Shotaro Tani and Rhyannin Bartlett-Imadegaw, 'Global Britain' Woos ASEAN in Fields of Former Empire, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Global-Britain-woos-ASEAN-in-fields-of-former-empire>

based order», which they aim to promote through the support of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity²⁰. However, this spirit has to reckon with some criticism addressed to the credibility of such ambitious purposes. For instance, for years US has been regularly conducting in South China Sea the so-called Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPs) to contest excessive claims made by Beijing, and right this kind of operations is expected to be enhanced under the aegis of the QUAD. However, Washington so far has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS), regulating rights and duties of navigation, which appears a sharp contradiction to some critics²¹.

In January 2021, Boris Johnson hinted at the opportunity of joining the QUAD, a claim which Chinese media, not surprisingly, disdainfully labelled as a move «following the same folly as the US»²². There are many discussions amongst pundits whether the organisation can evolve up to transform itself in a kind of «Asian NATO», but its military nature has now become undoubted. In 2020, Australia

In January 2021, Boris Johnson hinted at the opportunity of joining the QUAD, but this seems unlikely in the short run

joined the «Malabar exercise», a trilateral naval drill (regularly involving US, Japan and India), thereby gathering all QUAD countries. Moreover, three of them are financing the connection of a submarine internet cable to the Pacific island of Palau, a move interpreted by some as the possible prelude to devel-

oping a full-blown military headquarters²³. With the technical and juridical details of QUAD alliance still in the making, however, the entry of the United Kingdom at present would be problematic even to the United States, so that it seems to be unlikely in the short run.

A further bellwether of the hardships for London to fulfil an abiding maritime commitment in the Indo-Pacific can be found in its flagship military asset. The British government has announced the deployment of the new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth (the largest ship ever in the history of the Royal Navy) in the South China Sea in what could be described as a FONOP, probably in cooperation with US or QUAD. However, beyond the demonstrative character of such an action, some doubts have arisen upon the operational capabilities of the carrier, since it is equipped to serve as a platform only for aircrafts with V/STOL technology (Vertical/Short Takeoff and Landing), as is the case for the well-known Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning B (F-35 B). As reported by technical analysis on the matter, the lack of catapult and arrestor wires (allowing conventional aircrafts to both take off and land), make the F-35 B the only single type of jet able to operate from the carrier²⁴. This means that prior to the acquisition of the fighter fleet, the operational capabilities of HMS Queen Elizabeth will be limited to search and rescue operations with helicopters, airborne radar coverage or light resupply. Neither the IR nor the DCP specifies the exact amount of F-35 B, which are supposed to be at least 48 by 2025, but no reference is made to the 138 models previously indicated by the government²⁵.

20 Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>

21 Bhim Burtel, *Quad Lacks Moral Authority in South China Sea*, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/quad-lacks-moral-authority-in-south-china-sea/>

22 Lu Yuanzhi, *Joining Quad will See London Following the Same Folly as US*, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1214533.shtml>

23 *Palau could be the military headquarters of the QUAD and its location is enough to send a chill down Xi's spine*, <https://tfiglobalnews.com/2020/11/03/palau-could-be-the-military-headquarters-of-the-quad-and-its-location-is-enough-to-send-a-chill-down-xis-spine/>

24 Jacob Parakilas, *The Trouble With V/STOL*, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/the-trouble-with-v-stol/>

25 IR, p. 102.

By contrast, other measures seem to indicate that Euro-Atlantic region will remain at the core of UK's defence posture. First, the controversial announcement to raise the ceiling of nuclear-warhead stockpile by more than 40% (from 180 up to 260), «in recognition of the evolving security environment, including the developing range of technological and doctrinal threats», as the IR claims²⁶. Even though no specific country is mentioned, experts agree in viewing such a move against the background of the growing confrontation with Russia, taking into account of Moscow's improvement in fielded systems and development of new interceptors, as well as the deployment of the 9M279 missile (SSC-8 NATO) in Europe, which flouted the rules of the INF Treaty according to US government²⁷. More broadly, since 1962 UK nuclear force is part and parcel of NATO collective security, therefore bolstering London's deterrence capability entails *per se* an increasing commitment toward the Euro-Atlantic.

Other aspects related to the maritime domain portend that the Atlantic will maintain prominence relative to the Indo-Pacific. This is the case of the two new «Littoral Response Group», aimed to replace the Amphibious Task Group and support the Future Commando Force. The Royal Navy is expected to deploy its first LRG in 2021 in the Euro-Atlantic, whereas the second one will be deployed in the Indo-Pacific not earlier than 2023²⁸. Another naval project drift primarily, albeit not exclusively, towards the Euro-Atlantic is the Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance Ship (MROSS), a surface vessel whose main goal will be the protection of critical infrastructure undersea. Supposed to enter service by 2024, MROSS will be fitted with a set of capabilities to counter submarine threats in surrounding Atlantic waters, as for instance advanced sensors and autonomous undersea drones to gather data.

The increase in naval capabilities and nuclear warheads portend that the Euro-Atlantic region will remain at the core of UK's defence posture

All these elements buttress the interpretation given by one the above-mentioned articles in the American review «The National Interest», according to which «Britain is only nominally pivoting to the Indo-Pacific while keeping the majority of the force posture in the Atlantic»²⁹. Since the U.S. is projecting power in the Indo-Pacific region, the author suggests, London could help more Washington by concentrating its assets in the Atlantic. It is worth noting that the same perception is shared not only in the US, but also on the other side of the Pacific. According to «The Japan Times», amongst South Asian nations neither Britain nor EU countries enjoy such high esteem to play a leadership role. Hence, to carry out a fruitful cooperation between Indo-Pacific and Western countries, «limited defense resources are better employed to build up capabilities in Europe to free U.S. assets for use in the Indo-Pacific»³⁰. In India, the idea of

Lest fuelling tensions with China, even Indo-Pacific countries feeling uncomfortable with Beijing do not welcome UK military involvement in the area

²⁶ IR, p. 76.

²⁷ Douglas Berrie, Nick Childs, *The UK and Nuclear Warheads – Stretching Credibility?* <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2021/03/uk-nuclear-warheads-integrated-review>; Andrew Foxall, *Russia in the Integrated Review*, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/russia-in-the-integrated-review/>

²⁸ DFC, p. 47.

²⁹ Sumatra Maitra, *Realpolitik Returns to British Grand Strategy*, cit.

³⁰ Brad Glosserman, *Reality Tempers Europe's Indo-Pacific Ambition*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/03/23/commentary/world-commentary/europe-eu-asean-china-indo-pacific/>

Global Britain in itself prompted sharp criticism even prior to the release of the Integrated Review³¹ and Boris Johnson's visit to Delhi, scheduled for the end of April, will hardly bear upon this approach. The overall impression is that, lest fuelling tensions with China, even Indo-Pacific countries feeling uncomfortable with Beijing do not welcome UK military involvement in the area.

In the light of the foregoing, the most likely scenario is that the privileged field of endeavour in the Indo-Pacific will be the economic one, in the wider attempt of bolstering ties in the Anglo-

The most likely scenario is that the privileged field of endeavour in the Indo-Pacific will be the economic one

sphere, especially with Commonwealth countries. In point of fact, ASEAN, FPDA and QUAD have different goals and perspectives, sometimes running afoul with each other, whereas British power projection in the Euro-Atlantic is generally more welcomed by NATO allies also considering the US growing com-

mitment to the Indo-Pacific. To deepen this interpretation, it is worth dwelling more extensively on the specific countries the IR identifies as the main challenges to the UK.

3. Confronting China through Five Eyes Multilateralism

People's Republic of China and Russian Federation appear in the IR as key adversaries to Great Britain in the coming years, but the Review describes and treats them in quite different terms. China is recognised as a «strategic competitor» and its growth and assertiveness are directly linked with the shift of the economic and geopolitical centre of gravity eastward towards the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, it embodies a set of opportunities in terms of trade and investments that London has to be poised to seize. This ambiguity is quite explicit in the IR, sometimes in the same phrase: «China and the UK both benefit from bilateral trade and investment, but China also presents the biggest state-based threat to the UK's economic security»³². The condemnation of Chinese policy towards minorities in Xingjian and Hong Kong is nonetheless presented in the IR as illustrative of the distance between the two countries in terms of values and practices.

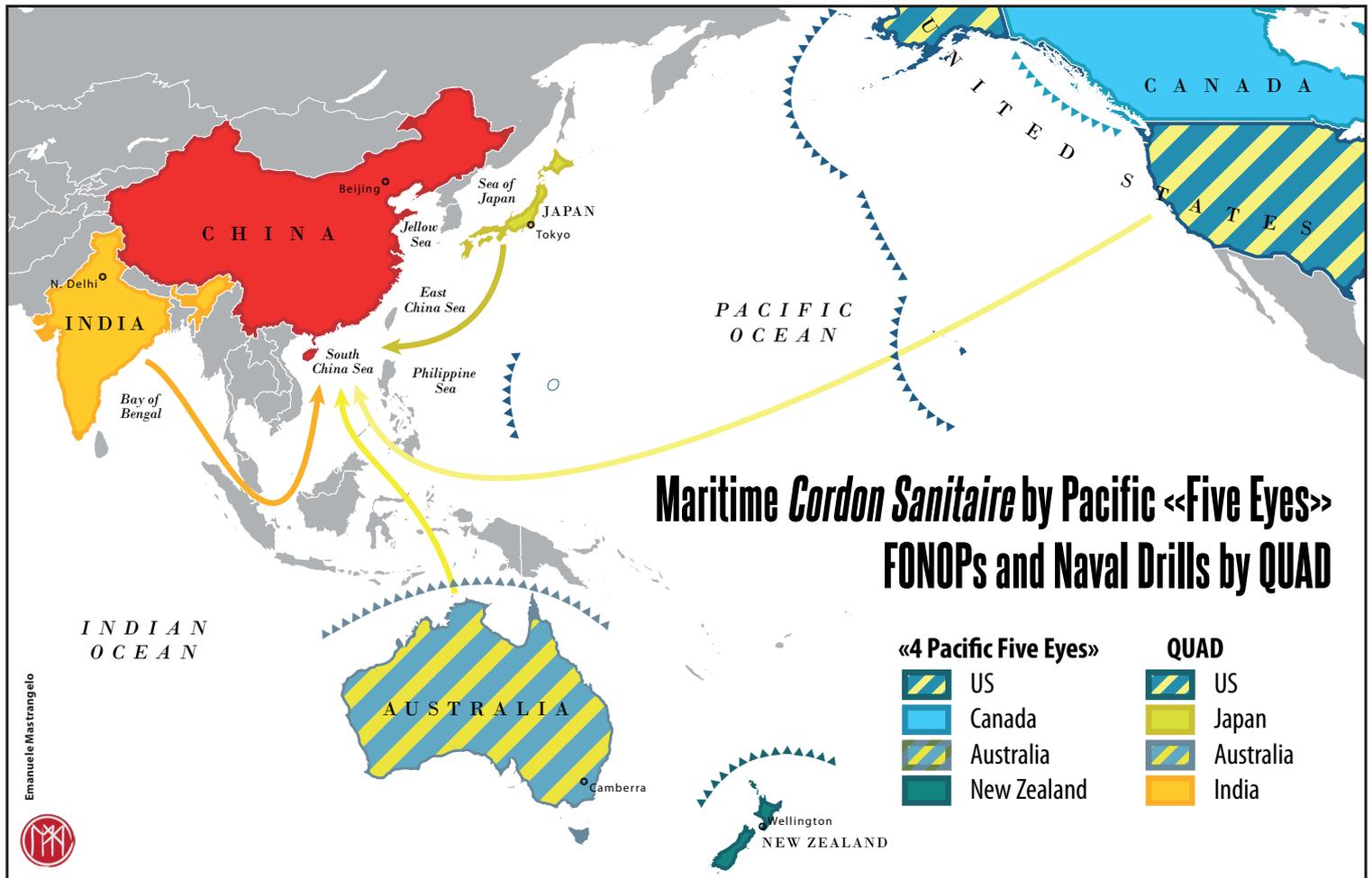
Not surprisingly, a vehement criticism from Beijing has not been long in coming. The Chinese state-owned newspaper «Global Times» (deemed an officious voice of CPC's thinking) issued a spiteful commentary describing the Global Britain concept as a «deceit» not in a strategic sense, but as the symptom of London's unwillingness to accept a post-Western era and cooperate with new emerging powers like China³³. For the opposite reason (a too-soft approach to Beijing's global ambitions in the name of pragmatism and economic interests), some Western commentators have criticized London's stance. On March 16 (i.e. the same day of the Review's release) in a leaked audio Foreign Secretary Dominique Rabb told British officials that UK will turn a blind eye to human rights in seeking economic partners. «If we restrict them to countries with ECHR-level standards of human rights, we're not going to do many trade deals with the growth markets of the future», he said³⁴. It is not ground-

31 Syed Akbaruddin, *Is 'Global Britain' Inimical to India?* <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/is-global-britain-inimical-to-india-10161150625192.html>

32 IR, p. 62.

33 Gao Jian, *Is Global Britain a Strategic Deceit?* <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219232.shtml>

34 Arj Singh, *Exclusive: Raab Says UK Wants Trade Deals With Nations That Violate Human Rights*, <https://www.huffington->



less to surmise the leak was not accidental, its aim being to send a conciliatory message to Beijing as a counterweight of the deserved condemnation of Chinese crackdowns and abuses. Only ten days earlier, Rabb had openly declared that Britain would welcome a free trade agreement «with our Chinese friends»³⁵.

Such a strategy consisting of sending contradictory messages hitherto turned out to be not satisfactory: on March 26, Beijing imposed sanctions on 10 British individuals and organisations as a retaliatory move against previous critiques they had addressed to Beijing alongside with EU, Canadian and US officials. More broadly, this quick sequence of events (disclosure of the IR, contrasting claims in the lead-up, Chinese sanctions) constitutes a glaring example about the difficulties to implement a balanced, «hybrid» and carrot-and-stick approach with China on a bilateral basis. In this regard, Global Britain strategy seems to be not up to the task, especially over the long run, due to the difference in economic and geopolitical size between a middle power as the UK and a global superpower

The challenge posed by China lends a specific geopolitical shape to Five Eyes, capable to create a maritime cordon sanitaire against Beijing, which tries to drive a wedge amongst them

[post.co.uk/entry/raab-trade-deals-human-rights_uk_6050d75bc5b605256ebeaca6](https://www.post.co.uk/entry/raab-trade-deals-human-rights_uk_6050d75bc5b605256ebeaca6)

³⁵ George Grylls, *Dominic Raab Tells 'Friends in Beijing' of Trade Hope*, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dominic-raab-tells-friends-in-beijing-of-trade-hope-6ldxmdfmg>

as China. To protect economic cooperation and simultaneously cope with China's challenge, London could probably become reliant on another group it belongs since the outset: the Five Eyes (FVEY), mentioned seven times in the IR, even though without reference to Beijing.

As is known, FVEY is an intelligence-sharing alliance, not a geopolitical one, but right the hegemonic dare posed by China to Western-based international order is going to reshape its geographical significance. In fact, four of its five members (United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) are genuinely «Pacific countries», since they have direct access to the namesake Ocean. In this regard, the set of political, military, economic and intelligence measures that they could put in place takes the geopolitical shape of a maritime *cordon sanitaire*. In November 2020, FVEY issued a joint statement urging China to overrule ban on Hong Kong legislators who had been expelled. It was a quite unusual move, to be read in connection with growing rumours that Japan, India and South Korea could join the alliance³⁶. In the meanwhile, Boris Johnson has proposed to transform G-7 into a «G-10 of democracies», involving right Australia, India and South Korea.

These indicators converge to confirm the Five Eyes geopolitical shift, wherein the United Kingdom (the sole non-Pacific country of the group) appears both obliged and interested to play a proactive role, in order to contrast China in a covert manner and simultaneously try to protect its trade in non-strategic sectors on a bilateral basis. A clear-headed analysis recently published by the Henry Jackson Society underscores the relevance of FVEY to the UK, suggesting the implementation of a coordinated strategy amongst its members to «breaking China supply chain». Since the bilateral economic dependence of every single FVEY member from China represents Beijing's competitive edge, the report suggests three kinds of responses: «negative decoupling» (restricting China in relation to strategic industries), «positive decoupling» (establishing a national framework to encourage strategic industries to flourish), «cooperative decoupling» (enhancing collaboration amongst the five powers and their international partners)³⁷.

China, for its part, seems bent on splitting FVEY members by leveraging on its economic weight and soft power. Over the last few months, «Global Times» has dedicated some editorials to slam Five Eyes, dubbed «axis of white supremacy» in the most controversial one³⁸. Several indicators portend that Beijing is going to engage with information operations targeting a twofold goal. On the one hand, driving a wedge amongst Five Eyes countries. On the other one, fuelling anti-Western sentiments rooted in Western (mostly English-speaking) societies by weaponizing issues such as racism, discrimination against minorities and all the themes related to the so-called «cancel culture» demonizing Western history and heritage. Such goals can be also pursued simultaneously. For instance, remembering the 2008 free trade agreement between New Zealand and China and praising Wellington's recalcitrant stance to align with anti-Chinese claims of FVEY, «Global Times» stated that «New Zealand is more inclusive and open-minded toward identity politics. It supports multiculturalism and repels racism»³⁹.

³⁶ Congressional Committee wants India Japan and South Korea at Par with Five Eyes on Intelligence Sharing, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/congressional-committee-wants-india-japan-and-s-korea-at-par-with-five-eyes-on-intelligence-sharing/articleshow/72587975.cms>

³⁷ Breaking the China Supply Chain: How the 'Five Eyes' can Decouple from Strategic Dependency, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/breaking-the-china-supply-chain-how-the-five-eyes-can-decouple-from-strategic-dependency/>

³⁸ Five Eyes Today's Axis of White Supremacy: Global Times Editorial, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1216338.shtml>

³⁹ Xu Shanpin, Five Eyes not as solid as it may look like, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1212795.shtml>

Beijing has officially praised the Black Live Matters movement in the United States and is even suspected to secretly prop up left-wing extremism through organizations like «China Progressive Association» in order to exacerbate American domestic tensions⁴⁰. In early 2021, signs of an ongoing information warfare on British turf have also appeared. For example, according to a recent investigation conducted by «The Times», China is bankrolling British YouTube influencers to produce pro-China contents⁴¹. Last February, Ofcom lifted the licence to broadcast in UK for the TV channel China Global Television Network, since it flouted British laws on editorial control. But if London can undertake different measures both on national and multilateral level to counter propaganda from abroad, Beijing will likely not take it lying down.

Chinese soft power is going to weaponize “cancel culture” and anti-Westernism: Beijing is suspected to support Black Live Matters in U.S. and to bankroll British YouTubers

4. Containing Russia from the Baltic to the Arctic: London’s role in the North-Atlantic

«Russia will remain the most acute direct threat to the UK, and the US will continue to ask more from its allies in Europe in sharing the burden of collective security»⁴². The way that the IR describes Russia leaves no room for doubt about London’s mistrust of the Kremlin, which appears in one-sided manner as the elected enemy. Hence, UK «will actively deter and defend against the full spectrum of threats emanating from Russia», since its competition and opportunism, as in the case of North Korea and Iran, «are key factors in the deterioration of the security environment and the weakening of the international order»⁴³. Some commentaries from Russian think tanks have obviously taken aim at the anti-Russian sentiment of the document, finding in it «a language recalling the well-known Churchill’s Operation Unthinkable» (the hypothetical plan to attack Soviet Union in 1945)⁴⁴.

Interestingly, in the articles on Russian websites available in English (as well as in the ones in English on Western websites deemed close to Russia and usually exposing pro-Russian views), Global Britain strategy is scathingly criticized as a whole for its reckless adventurism, unfounded ambitions and «anti-Russian and anti-Chinese plans»⁴⁵. In Russian, conversely, it is possible to find more nuanced assessments, admitting a different treatment between China and Russia and seeking to explain it more analytically in the light of the balance of power within the West⁴⁶. Furthermore, a few days after

40 Mike Gonzales, *Yes, a Pro-China Group in America Supports a Black Lives Matter Founder* <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/yes-pro-china-group-america-supports-black-lives-matter-founder>

41 Ben Ellery, Tom Knowles, *Beijing Funds British YouTubers to Further its Propaganda War*, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/beijing-funds-british-youtubers-to-further-its-propaganda-war-xsgqp5fgo>

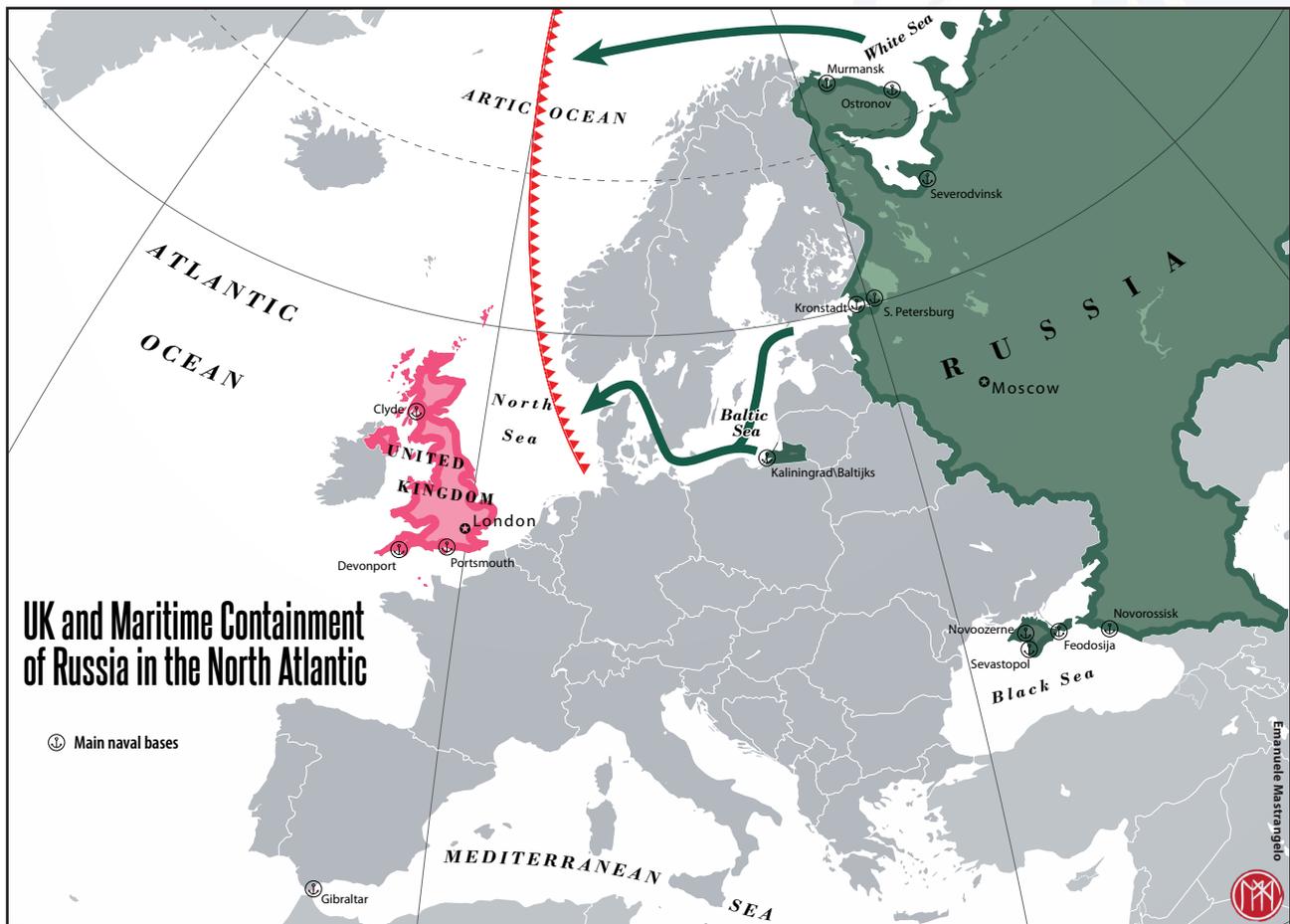
42 IR, p. 25.

43 IR, p. 70.

44 Dmitrij Minin, *Global'naja Britanija Borisa Džonsona – kostyl dlja Bajdena*, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2021/03/22/globalnaya-britanija-borisa-dzhonsona-kostyl-dlja-bajdena-53201.html>

45 See for example Fiona Edwards, *Johnson Takes Britain into Dangerous New Cold War Against China* <https://www.globalresearch.ca/johnson-takes-britain-dangerous-new-cold-war-against-china/5740492> ; Martin Sieff, *How the Gods Made Britain’s Prime Minister Mad*, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2021/04/05/how-gods-made-britain-prime-minister-mad/>

46 Ekaterina Postnikova, *Povod dlja optimizacii: kak Britanija menjaet svoi vooruzhennye sily*, <https://iz.ru/1141111/ekaterina->



the release of the IR, British media outlets reported that a mole in Russian security apparatus would have uncovered a new «hit list», drafted directly by Vladimir Putin, targeting six peoples living on the UK territory⁴⁷. One of the most prominent British experts on Russian affairs expressed a reasoned scepticism upon the likelihood of such claims, suggesting between the lines that the source could be a false flag interested in further escalating tension⁴⁸. In any case, the timing of the leak confirms (as though we needed any more) that UK-Russia relations will continue to be tense down the line.

On official level, the most significant reaction came from Russian Ambassador to London, who condemned as false the statement according to which Moscow constitutes «the most acute threat» to the security of Great Britain. Most importantly, he labelled the increase in nuclear warheads as a step cheeping away at the credibility of UK's commitment to disarmament, thereby implicitly recognising that such a decision is above all a move targeting Russia⁴⁹. Absent detailed plans, one can make some assumptions on how the nuclear deterrence and maritime deployment in the North Atlantic will target precisely Russia. It must be said, in this respect, that the pipeline project Nord Stream 2, running from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea (complete at 95% according to Russian sources) is usually analysed only from an economic standpoint, but has raised some military and intelligence concerns as well.

[postnikova/povod-dlia-optimizacii-kak-britaniia-meniaet-svoi-vooruzhennye-sily](https://www.zvezdaweekly.ru/news/2021371454-Zxnlq.html) ; Oleg Odnokolenko, Boris Džohnson: «Make Britain Great Again!» [https://zvezdaweekly.ru/news/2021371454-Zxnlq.html](https://www.zvezdaweekly.ru/news/2021371454-Zxnlq.html)

47 Nigel Nelson, *Vladimir Putin Issues New 'Kill list' - and Six of the Targets Live in Britain*, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/vladimir-putins-issues-new-kill-23765739>

48 Mark Galeotti, *The Truth Behind Putin's Hit Lists* <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-truth-behind-putin-s-hit-lists>

49 Tom Swarbrick *Speaks to Russian Ambassador Andrei Kelin*, <https://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/tom-swarbrick/russian-ambassador-andrei-kelin-lbc-full-interview/>

Even though NATO Secretary General stated that within the Alliance there is no unanimous position about Nord Stream 2, the pipeline is suspected by some to serve also for underwater deployment of surveillance sensors and devices capable to gather sensitive information. According to U.S. officials, Nord Stream 2 «would permit new technologies to be placed along the pipeline route»⁵⁰. Recently, a Polish analyst has restated the same concerns, remarking that Russia could also step up its naval deployment in the Baltic Sea under pretext of national security⁵¹. Irrespective of the technical feasibility of such claims, however, the Baltic Sea is often congested by NATO drills and constitutes a privileged area of maritime containment of Russia wherein Royal Navy plays a central role. Since the «Operation Red Trek» (the British campaign of 1918-1919 to stop the spread of Bolshevism), the UK has been steadily engaged into the defence of the Baltic State. Today London is part of the Northern Group, an informal association of nine countries with which it is reinforcing the cooperation, as recently confirmed by MOD's official documents⁵². From Moscow's point of view, such a role is duly taken into account. Assessing recent Royal Navy drills in the Baltic Sea, Russian analysts pointed out: «by securing sea lanes, in fact British admirals mean the containment of Russia in the Baltic Sea, to halt the deployment of Russian fleet in the North Atlantic, especially in the North Sea washing British shores»⁵³.

According to U.S. officials, Russian pipeline Nord Stream 2 could serve also for underwater deployment of surveillance sensors and devices

Russia's twofold outlet to the Atlantic (through the Baltic Sea and from its Northwestern shores) leads to another scenario wherein UK's role could be critical to the Euro-Atlantic defence: the Arctic. The IR makes only a little reference to the High North, but in 2018 Ministry of Defence announced a «Defence Arctic Strategy» (heretofore not yet released), prompting many speculations on the matter since then⁵⁴. As is known, the foreseeable effects of climate change in the near future could significantly affect the competition over the High Nord, since ice melting is expected to open up new shipping lanes, purportedly reshaping the commercial viability and the entire global sea traffic. For Moscow, the most important maritime passage will become the Northern Sea Route, connecting Arctic waters with Russian northernmost shores from the Kara Gate to the Bering Strait for approximately 5600 km.

Royal Navy is going increasingly to patrol Baltic and Arctic waters to contain Russia's maritime surveillance and expansion, also in view of ice melting in the High North

The ongoing militarization of the area, ranging from reopening of military outposts to testing undersea drones, has been representing an abiding source of concern amongst NATO and Western Arctic nations. As well as in the Baltic Sea, Royal Navy is going increasingly to patrol Arctic waters, as they have

50 Andrea Shalal, *Russia-Germany Gas Pipeline Raises Intelligence Concerns: U.S. official*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-germany-russia-pipeline-idUSKCN1lloYV>

51 *Putin's Pipeline of Aggression: How the Nord Stream 2 Threatens the West*, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/03/31/putins-pipeline-of-aggression-how-the-nord-stream-2-threatens-the-west/>

52 *Future Security Challenges in the Baltic Sea Region*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904438/20200723-dcdc_futures_regional_security_baltic.pdf

53 *Čto ponimajut britancy pod obespečeniem bezopasnosti morskich maršrutov*, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2021/03/20/cto-ponimaut-britancy-pod-obespecheniem-bezopasnosti-morskikh-marshrutov-53193.html>

54 Ben Barry, *No Cold Feet: the UK's New Arctic Defence Strategy*, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/11/uk-new-arctic-defence-strategy>

done recently by leading a maritime international operation in the Barents Sea⁵⁵. In addition to military activities, a further civil commitment to exploration, commerce and scientific research in the area could effectively contribute to restore the UK's stance as maritime trading nation. London has also an observer status within the Arctic Council, which it could exploit together with its geographic position. According to an expert, «the focus on expanding the naval presence in the Arctic is consistent with the Global Britain vision», although the UK seems not to have sufficient resources to engage with Russia in the Arctic beyond its commitments to NATO allies⁵⁶. The Alliance is going to increase its requests to London and a long-term commercial expansion chime with British national interest. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the IR is vague in both regards, and the non-disclosure of the awaited Defence Arctic Strategy reflects a strategic assessment still in the making.

5. Keeping the Kingdom United or the Unspoken Dare to British Security

A matter deeply related to North Atlantic security, but in some ways also independent from it, deserves further reflections: Scotland and its fate after Brexit. Yet the northernmost of the home nations plays a key geopolitical role in securing both the Baltic and North Atlantic Sea. In Scotland lies one of the three Royal Navy Headquarters, HMNB Clyde (Her Majesty's Naval Base), composed of the Faslane Naval Base on the Gare Loch, where the Vanguard-class nuclear submarines equipped with Trident missiles are located, and the Royal Naval Armaments Depot Coulport on Loch Long, which serves as site for storage and maintenance of nuclear materials. Furthermore, new important projects are bound to be put in place: the new Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft is expected to patrol the North Atlantic from the base at RAF Lossiemouth, where Boris Johnson had pledged to create more jobs and boost Scottish shipbuilding⁵⁷.

Likewise, the country is destined to become the development area of commercial launch capability: British satellites will be launched from Scotland by 2022 «as part of the UK Space Agency's programme to enable a UK-wide market for spaceflight services»⁵⁸. The choice of betting on Scotland as a kind of strategic technological hub cannot be coincidental in the light of the country's separatism, which is today perhaps more creeping to the UK's union than Northern Ireland question. In the aftermath of Brexit, the opportunity of a new referendum on Scottish independence is becoming more and more realistic. After Scottish Parliamentary elections scheduled for May 2021, it is likely that a new consultation on country's fate will be agreed.

In this regard, it is worth underlining the existing tie between nuclear question and Scottish politics. Almost all major local parties, from Scottish Green Party to Scottish Socialist Party and, most importantly, Scottish National Party, have often waved the anti-nuclear flag in their political activity. The SNP, in particular, has constantly embraced and nurtured the polemic targeting central government, colonial heritage and nuclear policy, in order to reshape a Scottish civic international identity, left-oriented, simultaneously «anti-Westminster» and «anti-imperialist». As a clear-eyed research put it, «should a future, inde-

⁵⁵ *Royal Navy to defend Arctic trade as ice melts*, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/royal-navy-to-defend-arctic-trade-as-ice-melts-od6ptz8c>

⁵⁶ Agne Cepinskyte, *Global Britain's Arctic Security Policy*, https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/bp270_uk_-_arctic-security-policy.pdf

⁵⁷ Torchuil Crichton, *Scotland and Union at Heart of Boris Johnson's Defence and Foreign Policy Review*, <https://www.dailypress.co.uk/news/politics/scotland-union-heart-boris-johnsons-23737832>

⁵⁸ IR., p. 58.

pendent Scotland repatriate British nuclear weapons, the effect upon the United Kingdom would be nearly as profound as the loss of Scotland itself, since nuclear weapons are interwoven with UK national identity conceptions»⁵⁹. One can even suppose the maintaining of strategic warheads and military outposts to become the complicated bargaining chip as a result of Scottish independence, because of the strategic importance of the country not only to Great Britain, but also to NATO and Euro-Atlantic security as a whole.

The combination of political separatism and geostrategic relevance ostensibly makes Scotland a sensitive target for foreign actors. Recently, British media outlets broke the news about the displacement of intelligence assets from London to Glasgow and other Scottish cities. Reportedly, the reason behind the decision was the fear that Russia could be trying to glean sensitive information about Faslane nuclear base and rekindle Scottish separatism⁶⁰. Up to 2015, prior and during the first referendum, Russian media outlets and think tanks were actually very active in promoting the cause of Scottish independence. Its alleged benefits to the international order, the special cultural affinity between Russia and Scotland (visually expressed by the common symbol of St. Andrew's cross) and some faltering analogies between Russian-speaking separatism in Eastern Ukraine and the Scottish one were widely held claims. Lately, the Scotland question seems to have come back on Russian media, where for instance it is argued that «the Scottish independence will enhance European stability and security»⁶¹.

Scotland hosts Royal Navy Headquarters and nuclear sites, while its population is still tempted by separatism: a combination making it a sensible target for foreign actors

The link between domestic issues and foreign influences, however, is always a two-way relationship escaping one-sided and simplistic narrative. One cannot scapegoat foreign competitors to explain problems originating from within the country and, by doing so, delegitimize democratic instances of self-determination. At the same time, taking into account the aforementioned geopolitical relevance of Scotland, the likelihood that other actors could fan the flames from outside is not groundless at all.

The unspoken geopolitical dare to Great Britain after Brexit is therefore keeping the Kingdom united, as the Integrated Review seems to recognize between the lines. The key passage lies in Boris Johnson's forward: «The Union between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has proved its worth time and again, including in this pandemic. It is our greatest source of strength at home and abroad»⁶². Notwithstanding all its contradictions and weaknesses, the IR exhibit the self-perception of potentialities and constraints of the UK's foreign policy after Brexit, considerably hinging on cooperation with its most ancient partners. In this respect, far from displaying unilateral adventurism, the Global Britain concept appears the complex and sometimes contradictory reshaping of a new multilateralism within the Anglosphere, Commonwealth and NATO. ■

59 Nick Ricktie, *Nuclear Identities and Scottish Independence*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10736700.2017.1345517>

60 Marco Giannangeli, *Scotland Independence Sabotage: UK Spies Being Relocated Due to Russia's 'Scotski' Pps*, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1412772/Scotland-Independence-China-and-Russia-UK-threat-scottish-independence>

61 *Nezavisimost' Shotlandii ukrepiť stabilnost' i bezopasnost' Evropy*, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2021/02/07/nezavisimost-shotlandii-ukrepiť-stabilnost-i-bezopasnost-evropy-52871.html>

62 IR, p. 2.