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Britain's Global Strategy: Multiple Priorities vs. Limited Resources

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With its withdrawal from the EU, the United Kingdom was faced with the need to radically rethink its position in the world. The vision of and slogan “Global Britain”, which dominated the message of the Conservatives governing the country since 2010, was finally specified in the strategic documents from 2021-23. However, Britain faces challenges with securing the necessary resources to implement this ambitious global strategy. Achieving the set goals has been hindered by, among others, internal disputes about the model of relations with the EU and more generally the scale of involvement in Europe compared to other macro-regions, as well as economic and budgetary policies. One of the main problems is the reluctance to increase defence spending significantly above 2% of GDP despite the expansion of declared aims in this field.

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In 2016, British politics revealed for the second time in recent history tension between visions of the United Kingdom's future as a state closely integrated with continental Europe and one of a country with generally global interests. Although control over leaving the EU was exercised solely by Conservative governments led by prime ministers David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson, the basic characteristics of the Brexit cleavage in British domestic politics made it very difficult to formulate a coherent new vision of foreign policy. This was especially so given that the attitude

A natural consequence of the British internal problems was the difficulties in (re)defining the United Kingdom's post-Brexit role in the world.

towards the EU created a cleavage cutting across the main political parties and their electorates, which was demonstrated by the nearly even result of the referendum, in which 52% of votes in favour of leaving the EU beat out the 48% in favour of remaining. This "half-empty, half-full glass" effect led to disputes as to what exact mandate the referendum set for Brexit-era governments. A natural

consequence of the British internal problems in agreeing on a common vision of relations with the EU was the difficulties in (re)defining the United Kingdom's post-Brexit role in the world.

The escalation of the domestic political dispute over Brexit resulted in the displacement of the original concept of a relatively "soft" exit from the EU, represented by Theresa May in 2016-2019, which assumed maintaining close cooperation with the European Union (including factual membership of Britain in the EU's single market for goods), by a much more radical formula introduced by Johnson in 2019-2020. It assumed the prioritisation of traditionally understood national sovereignty and setting Britain free from the "shackles" of EU decision-making processes, arrangements, and policies. The formal conclusion of the UK's withdrawal process from the EU at the end of 2020, which was based on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), finally allowed for working out a new vision of British foreign policy. It was presented in March 2021 in the form of the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (Integrated Review). This document assumed greater British involvement outside Europe, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. The main impetus for updating it in March 2023 was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, the 2023 "Refresh" confirmed all basic priorities and assumptions of the original strategy.¹

Evolution of the British Global Strategy

The 2021 document builds on past periodic strategic reviews, in particular the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR)² and the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR)³. Despite the conceptual continuity visible in defence matters, the 2021 Integrated Review set a new standard in the British political debate in several respects. Namely, it was the first document that assumed the integration of the entire broadly-defined sphere of external relations into one coherent strategy covering defence,

The Integrated Review is the first strategic document in several decades that is essentially based on the assumption of developing the British defence potential.

¹ It is worth emphasising that despite numerous personnel changes at the top of British politics in 2021-23, both documents were developed and are being implemented by the same expert team in the Prime Minister's Office led by Professor John Bew. See: S. Swinford, "Who is John Bew, Rishi Sunak's foreign policy adviser?" *The Times*, 20 October 2023, www.thetimes.co.uk.

² Ministry of Defence, "Modern Forces for the Modern World: Strategic Defence Review," July 1998, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>.

³ Cabinet Office, "Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review," October 2010, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/>.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

security, diplomacy, and other sectors.⁴ It was based on four assumptions: active shaping of the international environment; deterrence, defence and competition in all domains; eliminating weaknesses and increasing resilience; and, creating strategic advantages. For this reason, the Integrated Review was prepared by the Cabinet Office, and not one of the government departments. It is also the first strategic document in several decades that is essentially based on the assumption of developing the British defence potential and expanding the scope of roles played by the United Kingdom on a global scale. In contrast, the aim of the SDR was to extract a post-Cold War peace dividend from the British armed forces, while the key condition in the development of the SDSR were budget cuts caused by the 2008-2011 financial crisis.

The vision of “Global Britain” set out in the 2021 Integrated Review is based on a greater commitment to defending a world order based on multilateralism, international law, free trade, and democratic values. The following assumptions were highlighted: the principle of the United Kingdom’s sovereign foreign policy formation after Brexit; the need to distance itself from the EU while maintaining close cooperation in selected fields with its Member States; as well as a tilt towards the Indo-Pacific region.⁵ The key objectives of the new British strategy were: 1) maintaining strategic advantage through the development of scientific research and technology; 2) maintaining an open international order; 3) strengthening collective security and defence systems; and 4) increasing the level of state resilience. In parallel to the increase of the risk of peer-to-peer armed conflicts, the document also pointed to an increase in state-actor threats below the open conflict threshold, including intelligence and cyber operations, and disinformation campaigns. The UK also took into account systemic competition with countries questioning the international order (e.g., Russia, Iran, North Korea) or striving to restructure it (e.g., China). The document also identified strategic nuclear weapons as the cornerstone of the British defence strategy, announcing the expansion of the nuclear arsenal by about 45% and the readiness to modify the rules of engagement in response to hostile actions of other countries possessing weapons of mass destruction.

In a continuation of past strategies, the United States was named as the UK’s most important strategic ally.

In a continuation of past strategies, the United States was named as the UK’s most important strategic ally. This is due not only to U.S. power but also to the wide scope of British-American relations, including close historical and cultural ties, shared values, the similarity of legal systems, particularly close economic ties,⁶ and the scale of defence and intelligence cooperation. The document further highlights close relations with a number of European countries, in particular France, with which the UK has an especially close partnership in the field of security and defence. Poland was described as a “a vital partner on European security”.⁷ Although the UK recognises the EU’s collective contribution to ensuring peace and prosperity in Europe, the leading role has been assigned to cooperation with individual Member States.

⁴ It corresponded to the transformations in the structure of the British government implemented at the beginning of Johnson’s premiership, including the merger of the Department for International Development with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in March 2020. This approach also has many similarities to the American DIME (*Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic*) doctrine used in strategic planning and integrating the diplomatic, information, military and economic spheres. See: Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Doctrine Note 1-18: Strategy,” 25 April 2018, www.jcs.mil.

⁵ Government UK, “Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,” www.gov.uk.

⁶ In light of 2022 data, the U.S. was the most important export market for the UK (12% of exports by value, \$64 billion) and investment market (foreign direct investment, FDI, worth \$665 billion). In turn, for the U.S., the UK was the fifth most important export market worth \$76 billion and the most important FDI market worth \$1.1 trillion. See: Office for National Statistics, “UK Trade in Goods, Year in Review,” www.ons.gov.uk; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Direct Investment by Country and Industry, 2022,” www.bea.gov; World’s Top Exports, “United Kingdom’s Top Trading Partners 2022,” worldstopexports.com; Statista, “Top Export Partners U.S. 2022,” www.statista.com.

⁷ “Global Britain in a Competitive Age ...,” *op. cit.*

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

The 2023 Refresh,⁸ while retaining the essence of the original concept, identified the need to detail and rethink the UK's response to security challenges, particularly in the context of its commitment to the defence of Ukraine and the UK-U.S.-Australian Security Partnership (AUKUS). The updated

The 2023 Refresh emphasises the close connection of UK security with the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

strategy emphasises the close connection of UK security with the outcome of the war in Ukraine, which should influence the British determination to provide it with military support and to oppose Russia as the main source of direct threats to collective security in Europe. The assessment of China as a systemic rival was more pronounced than in 2021. However, despite intense expert and political debate, the 2023 document refrained from describing

China as an adversary. The Refresh highlighted threats from China such as attempts to build a Sinocentric world order, strengthening Sino-Russian-Iranian cooperation, and conducting large-scale rapid armament. The messaging in regard to containing Chinese actions aimed at changing the international order by force (e.g., restricting freedom of navigation in the South China Sea) was also strengthened. In this context, the UK's stronger involvement in regional alliances (e.g., AUKUS) and technological competition will be crucial.

In line with the principles of British policy towards Russian aggression,⁹ which is based on consistent support for Ukraine's war effort with supplies of weapons, intelligence, military training, and (although to a lesser extent) financial assistance, the 2023 Refresh declared that an additional £2.3 billion would be allocated to the defence of that country in the financial year 2023/2024. Moreover, in 2023, UK defence spending was increased by £11 billion (in 2023-2025) on top of the previous package worth £24 billion granted to the Ministry of Defence together with the adoption of the 2021 Integrated Review (assigned for the period of 2021-2025). The 2023 package is to be allocated mainly to replenishing the ammunition and equipment stocks transferred by the UK armed forces to Ukraine and to boost the submarine construction programme (AUKUS). These changes will increase the share of defence spending to 2.25% of the UK's GDP. In addition, the UK plans additional investments in science and technology. In 2022, the multi-annual financial plan was adopted to allocate a record amount of £39.8 billion for research and development (2022-2025), with the assumption that the share of this category of spending in UK's GDP would reach the level of 2.4% by 2027. In 2023, this financial programme was increased by £3.5 billion (to be spent by 2034).

The 2021 Integrated Review and its 2023 Refresh were followed by the 2021 and 2023 UK Defence Command Papers,¹⁰ which presented detailed UK defence policy. They have serious implications for Britain's cooperation with NATO. The documents confirmed the UK's commitments to the Alliance, including a military presence in Poland and Estonia and an increase in defence spending to 2.2% of

GDP. Nevertheless, the structure of expenditures, the expansion of the nuclear arsenal by about 45% and modification of the rules for its use, plans for the development of military bases and missions in Africa, Asia, and Australia, as well as the strengthening of offensive cyber capabilities and battlefield robotisation indicate a redirection of a significant part of British activities outside Europe. Moreover, the 2021 Integrated Review assumed a reduction of land forces to 73,000, which was maintained in the 2023 Refresh. The 2023 Defence Command Paper places a greater emphasis on the ability to respond to threats from state actors (e.g., symmetric conflicts, technological competition and the arms race, disruptions to

The 2023 Defence Command Paper places a greater emphasis on the ability to respond to threats from state actors.

⁸ Government UK, "Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World," www.gov.uk.

⁹ J. Rogers, P. Biskup, H. Shelest, "The Trilateral Initiative: Rekindling Relations between Britain, Poland and Ukraine," Centre on Geostrategy, 1 February 2023, www.geostategy.org.uk. P. Biskup, "Brytyjska polityka wobec Ukrainy: rewizja czy rozwinięcie globalnej strategii?" *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, Nr 2/2022, PISM, May 2022, pp. 78-89.

¹⁰ Government UK, "Defence Command Paper 2021: Defence in a Competitive Age," and "Defence Command Paper 2023: Defence's Response to a More Contested and Volatile World," www.gov.uk.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

international stability). However, responding to threats such as terrorism or climate change was re-evaluated as less important. As a consequence, the focus of British efforts in the field of broadly understood security was shifted to modernising the armed forces and developing the production and economic potentials necessary to compete on a peer-to-peer basis with hostile countries. In particular, the need to urgently strengthen the critical infrastructure and the UK's civil, air, and anti-missile defence was highlighted. There was also an emphasis on maintaining the tools of credible deterrence through investment in nuclear, conventional, cyber, and space capabilities, while maintaining NATO's central role in the British system of alliances. According to the UK, this organisation should also play the main role in coordinating support for Ukraine. Creating a strategic advantage through training of personnel for the defence sector, supporting innovation, wider use of new technologies (especially digital ones, such as artificial intelligence) and close cooperation between the armed forces, security forces, and industry were also emphasised. Finally, referring to the positive experience in supporting Ukraine's defence, the need to increase the economic resilience of the UK by tightening cooperation with the G7 countries was indicated.

Britain's Indo-Pacific Tilt

The 2021 Integrated Review characterised the UK as a European country with a wide range of global interests.

The 2021 Integrated Review characterised the UK as a European country with a wide range of global interests. Although Britain's prosperity will depend on deepening economic links with the most dynamic regions outside Europe (e.g., Africa, the Persian Gulf) and maintaining cooperation with European countries,

it is the Indo-Pacific region that is assumed to play the role of Britain's trade and economic growth engine in the 21st century. It is an area with the greatest economic dynamics and, at the same time, of key strategic importance, with which the UK has numerous historical, political, economic, and social connections (including with the approximately 1.7 million British expats residing there).

It is the Indo-Pacific region that is assumed to play the role of Britain's trade and economic growth engine in the 21st century.

Historically, in the period from the beginning of the 19th to the mid-20th centuries, the region—then defined as the Far East—was of great importance to the UK's colonial economy and foreign policy. After a period of relative decline in the region's importance to British politics in the second half of the 20th century, it increasingly regained its importance to the United Kingdom as a result of the post-Cold War globalisation. During David Cameron's premiership, bilateral relations with China were even described as a "Golden Era". All these factors were important during the 2016 referendum campaign in presenting by Brexit supporters of the "Global Britain" vision as an alternative to the EU. They pointed to both the need and possibility of renewing relations with the Commonwealth countries on the one hand and expansion into the dynamically developing Asian markets on the other. The latest examples of this approach were the decisions at the turn of 2020 and 2021 regarding the opening of British critical infrastructure to Chinese investment.¹¹

In 2020-2021, there was a fundamental shift in British policy towards China, and, as a consequence, the entire Indo-Pacific region.

However, shortly afterwards, in 2020-2021, there was a fundamental shift in British policy towards China, and, as a consequence, the entire Indo-Pacific region.

The shift had a number of causes, the most important of which were the change of status of Hong Kong by the PRC

¹¹ P. Biskup, "Dynamika i perspektywy relacji brytyjsko-chińskich w latach 2010–2021," [in:] *Chiny w polityce międzynarodowej, Studia i Analizy*, Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, Kraków 2022.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

in violation of the 1984 British-Chinese Joint Declaration¹² and the loss of trust in China in the context of its COVID-19 policy and hostile reactions to the Australian investigation into the causes of the pandemic (i.e., trade sanctions). The persecution of the Uyghur population, well publicised in the UK, and the policy of U.S. President Donald Trump's administration discouraging allies from cooperating with Chinese companies in building 5G networks also played an important role. This radical shift materialised in, among others, the blocking of Chinese investment into British critical infrastructure construction and management (including telecommunications networks and nuclear power plants), as well as into the military-industrial and electronics sectors (notably, British companies play a leading role on a global scale in the design of semiconductors). Although the Integrated Review points to China as a "systemic rival" with which it is possible to cooperate on selected issues (such as global climate change), the UK is to be generally more cautious about cooperation with it in most sectors ("derisking").¹³

Since July 2023, the economic foundation of the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt has been membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Since July 2023, the economic foundation of the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt has been membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which was preceded by the conclusion of bilateral trade

agreements with Japan and Australia.¹⁴ After the British accession, the CPTPP consists of 12 countries with about 500 million inhabitants and a 10% share of the global GDP (compared to about 15% for the EU).¹⁵ British activity in the Indo-Pacific also includes strengthening cooperation with ASEAN as the traditional leading regional bloc. However, it has a narrower scope and focuses on improving the multilateral trading system, fighting corruption and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital innovation, and creating resilient value chains.¹⁶

Since 2020, UK military activity in the region has been increasing, symbolised by the inaugural operational tour of the *HMS Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carrier group with a mixed British-American air wing on board. One of the most important moments of the implementation of the new UK security strategy for the Indo-Pacific region was the conclusion in September 2021 of the AUKUS tripartite agreement on security, defence, and technology cooperation.¹⁷ Subsequently, it was supplemented by the first executive agreement, announced during a meeting of U.S. President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in San Diego on 13 March 2023.¹⁸

AUKUS agreement from September 2021 was supplemented by the first executive agreement on 13 March 2023.

This executive agreement provides for investments in the development of an industrial base in the United States, Britain, and Australia for the construction of nuclear-powered submarines. It will be implemented in stages. In the first of them, from 2024, staff exchange will be launched, and British and American ships will be visiting Australian ports on a regular basis. The second one, from 2027, envisages the rotational stationing of these units in Australia. In the third, in the early 2030s, Australia will purchase

¹² "Official Publication: Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong," 7 Loy. L.A. Int'l & Comp. L. Rev. 139 (1984), <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/>.

¹³ P. Biskup, "Polityka Zjednoczonego Królestwa wobec Indo-Pacyfiku: Od brytyjsko-chińskiej złotej ery do AUKUS," *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, Nr. 4/2023, PISM, December 2023.

¹⁴ Government UK, Accession Protocol of the UK to the CPTPP, 17 July 2023, www.gov.uk; UK-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, 7 December 2020, www.gov.uk; UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement, 15 June 2021, www.gov.uk.

¹⁵ Government UK, "The UK and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)," www.gov.uk; Statista, "European Union—Share in the Global GDP Adjusted for Purchasing Power 2028," www.statista.com.

¹⁶ Government UK, "UK-ASEAN Joint Declaration," www.gov.uk.

¹⁷ M. Piotrowski, "AUKUS—porozumienie wojskowe z nietaktem dyplomatycznym w tle," *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, Nr 2/2022, PISM, May 2022, pp. 115-123.

¹⁸ Government UK, "Fact sheet: Trilateral Australia-UK-US Partnership on Nuclear-Powered Submarines," www.gov.uk.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

from the U.S.—as a bridging solution—up to five multi-purpose Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines. In the fourth, in the late 2030s, it will build at least eight new *AUKUS*-class units. They will be based on a British design and equipped with devices developed jointly by all three countries. Australia will simultaneously invest in the expansion of the U.S. and UK shipbuilding industrial bases. British obligations involve an increase in expenditure on the construction of new ships, shipyard

In the last decade, UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific also has been augmented by strengthening bilateral military-industrial and technological partnerships with Japan and South Korea.

infrastructure, and the expansion of bases both in the country and in Australia. The agreement also implies a significant increase in the size of the British submarine fleet by the end of the 2030s (from the current 7 *Astute*-class units to 19 *AUKUS*-class units)¹⁹.

In the last decade, UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific also has been augmented by strengthening bilateral military-industrial and technological partnerships with Japan and South Korea. In relation to the first country, the key was the conclusion in December 2023 of a trilateral British-Japanese-Italian treaty on the joint development and production by 2035 of a sixth-generation fighter (Global Combat Air Programme, GCAP, formerly Tempest). The seat of the GCAP consortium is Britain. The consortium consists of the British companies BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Leonardo UK, and MBDA UK, and on the Japanese and Italian sides, Mitsubishi and Leonardo, respectively.²⁰ Cooperation with South Korea, in turn, included concluding a trade agreement in 2019,²¹ establishing a strategic dialogue between the two countries in 2022 and finalising a number of agreements in 2023 during President Yoon Suk Yeol's state visit to Britain. These agreements concerned, among others, a strategic partnership in the field of cybersecurity, deepening cooperation between defence industries (including in relation to the Korean aircraft carrier programme²²), and cooperation between the navies of both countries in the enforcement of UN sanctions against North Korea.²³

Relations with the EU: Between Competition and Normalisation

Following Brexit, UK-EU relations entered a new stage. Initially, in the years 2020-2022, they were characterised by a high level of competition, as both the UK and EU wanted to emphasise their distinctiveness. Consequently, after the conclusion of the TCA in December 2020, British-EU disputes over the status of Northern Ireland quickly became apparent.²⁴ However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine stimulated the gradual normalisation of relations, which significantly accelerated after changes in the British leadership at the turn of 2022 and 2023.²⁵

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine stimulated the gradual normalisation of relations, which significantly accelerated after changes in the British leadership at the turn of 2022 and 2023.

¹⁹ A. Allegretti, "Size of UK's Nuclear Submarine Fleet Could Double Under AUKUS Plans," *The Guardian*, 13 March 2023, www.theguardian.com.

²⁰ Government UK, "UK, Japan, and Italy Sign International Stealth Fighter Jet Programme Treaty," Ministry of Defence, 14 December 2023, www.gov.uk; P. Biskup, "Polityka Zjednoczonego Królestwa wobec Indo-Pacyfiku: Od brytyjsko-chińskiej złotej ery do AUKUS," *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, Nr 4/2023, PISM, December 2023.

²¹ Government UK, *UK/Korea: Free Trade Agreement (with Exchange of Notes)*, 10 September 2019, www.gov.uk. In 2023, negotiations concerning its expansion were initiated.

²² A. Tovey, "Aircraft Carrier Tech Offered to South Korea as Royal Navy Extends Horizons," *The Telegraph*, 21 March 2021, www.telegraph.co.uk.

²³ Government UK, "UK-Republic of Korea Strategic Dialogue 2022," FCDO, 28 September 2022; "UK-Republic of Korea Strategic Cyber Partnership," FCDO, 23 November 2023; "UK and South Korea to agree New Partnership to Redefine and Strengthen Ties for Next Generation," Prime Minister's Office, 20 November 2023, www.gov.uk.

²⁴ P. Biskup, "The Crisis of the Northern Ireland Political System and EU-UK Relations," *PISM Policy Paper*, No. 17 (203)/2021, 15 July 2021, www.pism.pl.

²⁵ P. Biskup, "Sunak Government Is the Tories' Last Chance," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 137/2022, 28 October 2022, www.pism.pl.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

After 2020, the UK made intense efforts to quickly finalise new trade deals, signalling a shift away from the inherited EU-membership framework. Since 2021, the UK has renewed more than 70 trade agreements with third countries, concluded several new bilateral treaties, and joined the CPTPP in July 2023. From January 2021, the UK began to gradually disconnect from the EU single market. While at the time of withdrawal the British regulatory framework was identical to the EU one, since then the UK has only been obliged not to worsen its own standards compared to the EU's 2020 standards, despite the continuous development of EU regulations (*acquis communautaire*). Consequently, even when the treaties signed by the UK with third countries simply “copy and paste” earlier EU treaties with those countries, the state of play on the British market has significantly changed for EU companies. This is because the position of goods and entities from those third countries on the British market becomes equalised in comparison to the position of EU goods and entities no longer protected by the external trade barriers of the single market.

During the 2020-2022 UK-EU tensions, attempts to implement the EU-UK maritime regulatory border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain provided for in the 2019 Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland led to a gradual deterioration of the political situation in this province. This led in 2021 to the collapse of the local system of devolved government based on power-sharing between Unionists and Republicans (which persists to this day).²⁶ EU-UK disputes concerning the model of implementation in Northern Ireland of the abovementioned maritime border also resulted in the European Commission delaying the admission of British entities to the Horizon research and innovation programme. Other fields of EU-British competition included the financial services and fishing sectors. The parties competed, among others, in respect of the (re)location of the leading European financial centre. The actions of the EU and its Member States were aimed at limiting the access of British

entities to the EU market and supporting the outflow of investors from London to, among others, Paris, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, and Dublin.

A breakthrough moment in post-Brexit UK-EU relations was the British decision to join the European Political Community (EPC) and concluding the Windsor Framework.

A breakthrough moment in post-Brexit UK-EU relations was the decision by Prime Minister Liz Truss in October 2022 to join the European Political Community (EPC)²⁷ project promoted by France. It

was followed in February 2023 by Sunak and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen concluding the Windsor Framework. As concerns the EPC, engagement in this project has been continued by Sunak, leading to the UK being accepted as host of its summit in spring 2024.²⁸ The EPC is a forum for UK-EU strategic dialogue, which the TCA failed to do. This state of affairs resulted from Britain's withdrawal in 2020 from negotiations on post-Brexit cooperation in the field of foreign and security policy with the EU. In the assessment of the Johnson government, EU proposals regarding both the institutionalisation of this cooperation and the translation of the British contribution to EU security into the economic terms of the deal were unsatisfactory.²⁹ Importantly, the EPC has also been pointed out in the French-German expert report on EU reform as a future instrument for the institutionalisation of EU-British relations that would fit with the multi-speed integration framework.³⁰

²⁶ P. Biskup, “Influence of UK Local and National Elections on EU-British Relations,” *PISM Bulletin*, No 87 (2004) 1 June 2022, 1 June 2022, www.pism.pl.

²⁷ J. Pieńkowski, T. Żornaczuk, “Moldova Hosts 2nd European Political Community Summit,” *PISM Spotlight*, No. 25/2023, 2 June 2023, www.pism.pl.

²⁸ P. Biskup, Ł. Maślanka, “Between Crisis and Cooperation: UK-France Relations after Brexit,” *PISM Strategic File*, No 1 (122)/2023, 12 January 2023, www.pism.pl.

²⁹ P. Biskup, “The End of the Beginning? EU-UK Relations 100 Days after Brexit,” *PISM Strategic File*, No. 3 (95)/2021, 27 April 2021, www.pism.pl.

³⁰ Federal Foreign Office (Germany), “Franco-German Report on EU Reforms,” auswaertiges-amt.de; J. Szymańska, T. Zajęc, “Franco-German Group of Experts Deliver Report on EU Reforms,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 138 (2257)/2023, 2 October 2023, www.pism.pl.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

The aim of the Windsor Framework amending the 2019 Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland³¹ was to reduce UK-EU tensions by improving the flow of trade within the United Kingdom, protecting the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the UK (which was the main demand of Unionists), securing the sovereignty of the inhabitants of this province, as well as protecting the EU's legal order. The most important provisions of the Framework concern the creation of a two-lane system at check-in points on the maritime regulatory border for goods imported into Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK. The green lanes will be intended for goods that will remain within the United Kingdom, while the red ones will be for goods that can be transferred across the "invisible" EU-British land border on the island of Ireland. The introduction of green lanes visibly reduced the administrative burden for companies conducting business activities between different parts of the UK. The original procedures were significantly hampering trade across that maritime border. Moreover, the agreement allows the British government to change the rules of VAT and excise taxation in Northern Ireland (which was not possible under the original Protocol). It also enables the automatic introduction into circulation in the province of medicines approved for sale in other parts of the UK. Finally, the Framework created a legal mechanism that allows the people of Northern Ireland to block the entry into force of EU regulations in the province through the Northern Ireland Assembly (Stormont). The use of this mechanism by the Assembly will provide the British government with veto power over the application of relevant EU law ("Stormont brake"). From the EU's point of view, the key fact is that this agreement confirmed the supervision of the EU's Court of Justice (CJEU) over the application of EU law in Northern Ireland and the coverage of this province with legislation on the common market for goods to the extent necessary for the functioning of the "invisible" land border on the island of Ireland.

Economic Challenges for the UK Strategy

The implementation of the strategy formulated in 2021-23 is, on the one hand, strongly dependent, on the state of the national economy and budget policy formulated on its basis, and, on the other, on the foundations of the future economy formed by the green transformation and energy policy.

Currently, challenges for the British economy include the still unfinished post-Brexit transformation and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to debt incurred to finance aid programmes and the subsequent inflation caused by them,³² as well as radical fluctuations in energy prices.³³

British ambitions in the field of global strategy currently encounter serious barriers related to financing from the state budget of areas covered by the Integrated Review.

While Britain's post-pandemic level of growth can be assessed as relatively high in 2022 (4.7% of GDP) and unremarkable in 2023 (0.6% of GDP), cumulative level of public debt remains at a record high for peacetime at about 100% of GDP, while current debt is also at a historically high level of £130 billion. The key socio-economic problem remains the intense—

by British standards—inflation, which stood at 6.7% in August 2023 and has had a serious impact on the cost of living of citizens. For example, in January 2023 the average interest rate for a two-year mortgage in the UK rose to a record high of 6% (from an average of 2%).³⁴ As a consequence, British ambitions in the field of global strategy currently encounter serious barriers related to financing from

³¹ EU, *Windsor Framework*, 27 February 2023, www.europa.eu; Government UK, *The Windsor Framework*, 27 February 2023, www.gov.uk.

³² P. Biskup, "The Upcoming Scottish Parliamentary Elections and the Challenges of Brexit and the Pandemic," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 15(1711)/2021, 28 January 2021, www.pism.pl.

³³ P. Biskup, "The New British Government Faces a Perfect Storm," *PISM Spotlight*, No 116/2022, 9 September 2022; P. Biskup, "Sunak Government Is the Tories' Last Chance," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 137/2022, 28 October 2022, www.pism.pl.

³⁴ MacroTrends, "U.K. GDP Growth Rate 1961-2023," www.macrotrends.net; "How Much Money Is the UK Government Borrowing, and Does It Matter?" BBC News, 20 October 2023, www.bbc.com; Office for National Statistics (UK), "Inflation and Price Indices," www.ons.gov.uk.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

the state budget of areas covered by the Integrated Review and constituting broadly understood foreign policy.

Defence spending in the financial year 2021/ 2022 (FY 2020/2021) amounted to £31.6 billion, foreign and development policy spending was £7.4 billion, and foreign trade spending at £0.5 billion. For comparison, in the same period, spending on health and social care was £169.1 billion and education was £71.6 billion.³⁵ As a result of the allocation of additional funding for defence in the 2021 Integrated Review, defence spending increased to £55.5 billion in FY 2022/23. However, in relative terms, defence spending has consistently fluctuated around 2% of GDP, and Prime Minister Sunak refused to indicate a date for increasing it to 2.5% of GDP.³⁶ This happened despite the savings resulting from the inclusion of development aid in the budget of the FCDO in 2021, along with the abolition of the government department dedicated to it and the subsequent abolition in 2022 of the statutory obligation to spend 0.7% of GDP for this purpose.

The green transition was at the heart of the Johnson government's 10-point plan for a new British industrial revolution released in 2021, covering sectors from offshore wind to public transport. Already in 2008, the UK adopted the first legally-binding targets for reducing CO₂ emissions. Furthermore, in 2019, under May's government, a commitment to reduce emissions to "net zero" by 2050 was adopted. During Johnson's premiership, Britain was promoted as the centre of green finance and ecological standards and a sustainable economy model has taken an important place in post-Brexit UK trade negotiations. The UK has also sought to maintain a prominent position at climate forums, especially at the COP26 conference in Glasgow in 2021.³⁷

However, the original green policy of the Johnson era has been subjected to very significant socio-economic pressure as a result of Russia's aggressive policy, starting with speculation on the European gas market at the turn of 2021-2022, and then the global fluctuations in gas prices after the invasion of Ukraine. This war situation, regardless of the inflation it generated, clearly demonstrated to the British authorities the importance of energy supply security. As a result, in September 2022, Truss decided to make major adjustments to the climate and energy strategy published by Johnson just a few months earlier. They included, among others, introducing security of supply and network

In 2023, Sunak began a systematic review of climate and energy policy.

stability as new criteria for assessing energy issues, and unlocking the exploitation of new gas, oil, and coal deposits in the UK.³⁸

A year later, Sunak began a systematic review of climate and energy policy.³⁹ In July 2023, the British government announced a plan to issue 100 new licenses to extract oil and gas from the North Sea deposits in order to maximise the share of domestic production in consumption.⁴⁰ Then, in September 2023, Sunak redefined the portfolio of the relevant minister to "Energy Security and Net Zero"⁴¹ and postponed until 2035 a ban on the sale of new cars with combustion engines, as well as on central heating and water heating systems powered by oil, gas, LPG, or coal. Third, he announced a change in the procedures for approving the British CO₂ emissions licensing system ("carbon budgets") in

³⁵ Government UK, "Budget 2021," www.gov.uk; Statista, "UK Defense Spending 2023," www.statista.com; M. Stronell, "UK Defence Spending to Remain above 2% of GDP," *Jane's*, 18 November 2022, www.janes.com.

³⁶ "Sunak Government Is the Tories' Last Chance ...", *op. cit.*

³⁷ P. Biskup, "Socioeconomic and Security Challenges to Climate Change Policy in Britain," *PISM Strategic File*, No. 7 (115)/2022, 23 June 2023, www.pism.pl.

³⁸ P. Biskup, "The New British Government Faces a Perfect Storm," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 116/2022, 9 September 2022, www.pism.pl.

³⁹ "What Sunak's Net Zero Pivot Means for UK Climate Goals and the Next Election," *Financial Times*, www.ft.com.

⁴⁰ Government UK, "Hundreds of New North Sea oil and Gas Licences to Boost British Energy Independence and Grow the Economy," 31 July 2023, www.gov.uk.

⁴¹ "In-depth Q&A: What Do Rishi Sunak's U-turns Mean for UK Climate Policy?" *Carbon Brief*, 22 September 2023, www.carbonbrief.org.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

order to increase the role of the House of Commons in the process at the expense of expert bodies (thus strengthening political control over the process). These changes were concluded by the adoption of the Energy Act in October 2023.⁴²

The Act introduced, among others, new tender procedures and a system for supervising mergers in the energy sector, as well as regulations that prioritise the safety of smart energy devices. The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM) will also be able to accelerate planning decisions and other administrative procedures related to building infrastructure and supporting innovation in the sector. In particular, OFGEM became authorised to take action to promote hydrogen transport and storage (by removing market barriers, reducing upfront costs, and creating a new licensing framework), and CO₂ transport and storage to help build a carbon capture system. As a result, the Act not only created a new regulatory framework that is intended to allow the British economy to make far-reaching savings in the process of implementing the green transformation but also gives high priority to energy security.⁴³

This policy was maintained, despite strong criticism in the UK, during the COP28 climate summit in Dubai in November-December 2023, where the British delegation supported reducing consumption—instead of phasing out—fossil fuels (questioning previous arrangements within the G7 group). Delaying the dates for achieving intermediate milestones to climate neutrality in 2050 was also maintained. Prime Minister Sunak argued that the “transition to net zero should make us all safer and better off. It must benefit, not burden ordinary families”.⁴⁴

Conclusions and Perspectives

Since leaving the EU, Britain has been trying to consistently implement a strategy of distancing itself from the EU’s market and decision-making mechanisms in order to strengthen links with regions with faster economic growth, especially the Indo-Pacific. In parallel, over the last few years, the British authorities have tried to maintain bilateral cooperation with traditional European partners, bypassing the EU’s decision-making structures. At the same time, they also created new formats of military and economic cooperation with the Indo-Pacific region.

The UK Strategy 2021 requires a balanced but critical assessment. Taking into account the political chaos in Britain in 2016-2020 that preceded its development, it is worth noting the high level of conceptual coherence, including a clear consideration of the systemic consequences of the model of relations with the EU adopted by the Johnson government (decision-making freedom at the expense of access to the EU market). However, the consequence of this model is not only the possibility, but also the necessity, to look for new partners and markets outside Europe. This requires many years of adjustments and adaptation, the duration of which will probably be comparable to the EU accession process (about a decade). Serious doubts can be raised about the possibility of implementing these ambitious assumptions without a fundamental reform of the budget, which, in turn, is not possible without a public debate and obtaining a new electoral mandate to introduce changes in the structure of the British economy. In practice, this means that the required reforms can only be implemented after the upcoming General Election (which must be held in January 2025 at the latest) and to the

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⁴² Government UK, *Energy Act 2023*, www.legislation.gov.uk.

⁴³ J. Loughran, “Major Revamp of Energy Rules Targets Net Zero and Boosts Competition,” *Engineering and Technology Magazine*, 27 October 2023, <https://eandt.theiet.org/>.

⁴⁴ Government UK, “PM to Call for ‘Era of Action’ at COP28 Climate Summit,” Prime Minister’s Office, 1 December 2023, www.gov.uk; “The Observer View on COP28: UK Is Turning Its Back On Chance to Lead Climate Fight,” *The Observer*, 12 November 2023, www.theguardian.com.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

extent authorised by the electoral manifesto of the winning political party. As a consequence, this will ultimately require adjusting the 2021 strategy to the new political reality after the upcoming 2024 General Election and/or finding foreign partners to finance the most expensive programmes necessary for its implementation.

Moreover, it seems that we are already dealing with the beginning of the abovementioned trend. With regard to the EU, Prime Minister Truss decided to enter a strategic dialogue with the EU within the EPC, filling—although for now only in the political dimension—the gap left by the failure of talks on this topic during the British-EU Brexit negotiations in 2020. As regards sharing the costs of the largest armament programmes with foreign partners, the AUKUS executive agreement of March 2023 assumes far-reaching integration of the defence industries of the three countries involved based on the exchange of nuclear technologies, reconnaissance systems, communications, and others. The British-Japanese-Italian treaty of December 2023 is expected to have a similar effect, which is to provide the GCAP consortium with a critical mass of orders that will make this sixth-generation fighter project economically justified. Bilateral cooperation with Australia, Japan, and South Korea on the most advanced military and dual-use technologies will also provide an important anchor for British policy in the Indo-Pacific region. The revision also began in the field of the green transformation. This happened despite strong controversies within the ruling party (including protests by Johnson and Alok Sharma, former Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and president of COP26 in 2021-2022), as well as within opposition parties.

Although the conclusion of the Windsor Framework and the UK's accession to the EPC allow for the remodelling of EU-British relations in the future, the direct effects of these actions are of limited impact. In practice, they made it possible to unblock the fields of EU-British cooperation already

Deepening or broadening this cooperation would require an actual renegotiation of the TCA.

provided for in the TCA (e.g., the Horizon programme). Deepening or broadening this cooperation, however, would require an actual renegotiation of the TCA, the earliest opportunity for which will be the upcoming periodic review in 2025, which will take place after the elections to the House of Commons and the European Parliament.

As cooperation under the CPTPP will be deepening, Britain will increase its economic distance from the EU (especially in the field of economic regulation and development of value chains), although significant corrections should be assumed to be introduced in relation to Johnson's original concept from 2020. For example, the willingness to tighten research and scientific cooperation with the EU is already visible, and the Labour Party announced its readiness to harmonise sanitary and phytosanitary standards after the General Election. The British side will also be interested in participating in EU armament programmes. In turn, a threat to the treaty basis of British-EU relations would be the UK's revocation or suspension of the European Convention on Human Rights, to which the legal structure of the TCA is partially anchored. This risk is related to the increasing radicalisation of the British debate on combating illegal immigration.⁴⁵

In speeches in September 2023, Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour Party, which is leading in the electoral competition, pledged to negotiate changes to the TCA, which would improve economic exchange, scientific cooperation, and allow for closer coordination of foreign and security policy. The Labour leader said there is "more that can be achieved across the board" between the UK and EU in a revised deal—on business, veterinary compliance, professional services, security, innovation, research and other areas. However, Starmer directly ruled out the UK's return to the EU's customs union and common market.⁴⁶ Therefore, taking into account the Labour Party's programme

⁴⁵ P. Biskup, "British Parties Start Vying for Voters Ahead of the 2024 General Election," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 184 (2303)/2023, 14 December 2023, www.pism.pl.

⁴⁶ J. Bartholomew, "Labour will seek major rewrite of Brexit deal, Keir Starmer pledges," *The Guardian*, 17 September 2023, www.theguardian.com.

PISM STRATEGIC FILE

announcements, it can be expected that Britain will keep deepening cooperation with the Indo-Pacific countries, which will force the continuation of the trend of increasing British military involvement outside Europe. Moreover, although the Russian invasion accelerated the normalisation of British-EU relations even before the upcoming General Election, it also strengthened the belief in the dominant role of NATO in the security system in Europe.⁴⁷ This would mean that although the British strategy will most likely be revised after the parliamentary elections, radical changes in its key assumptions should not be expected.

From Poland's point of view, the (re)distribution of the UK's budgetary funding between key policy areas will be crucial. British involvement in Europe has so far been very valuable from the Polish

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perspective, in the form of maintaining military contingents in Poland and the Baltic states (including acting as a framework state for NATO forces in Estonia), assistance in the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, and significant support for Ukraine. In the latter case, what is important is not only the scale of delivered supplies and military training, second only to the United States and similar to Polish ones, but also the systematic role of a leader initiating new forms of support for Ukraine (including the first deliveries of Western-made

tanks and long-range cruise missiles, starting a discussion about the return of NATO instructors to Ukraine⁴⁸ or handing over the first warships to rebuild Ukraine's navy⁴⁹). However, the current British involvement on NATO's Eastern Flank and Ukraine will be increasingly difficult to maintain, taking into account the size of the British defence budget and the commitments made, for example, under AUKUS.

In the medium term, Britain will have an advanced—but numerically very limited—military and technological potential, which will be allocated primarily in resources with high strategic mobility (such as air and naval forces) or those capable of acting at a distance (such as cyber and space capabilities). By contrast, land forces will remain severely limited for the foreseeable future. Taking into account, on the one hand, the limited resources that Poland can devote to the modernisation of its own armed forces, and, on the other hand, the rapidly tightening military-industrial cooperation with the UK,⁵⁰ it would be worth developing a strategic dialogue with Britain, both bilaterally and within the EU and NATO, on the division of tasks and financial burdens connected to providing specific military and security capabilities and development of dual-use technologies. The same principle should apply to projects and cooperation in the reconstruction of Ukraine.

⁴⁷ A demonstration of the British perception of NATO's fundamental role in the European security system was the UK's bridging security guarantees for Sweden and Finland in their accession to the Alliance. See: P. Biskup, K. Dudzińska, "Finland's Declaration on NATO Accession," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 90-2022, 13 May 2022, www.pism.pl.

⁴⁸ N. Badshah, "British Troops Could Deploy to Ukraine for First Time to Train Soldiers, Says Grant Shapps," *The Guardian*, 30 September 2023, www.theguardian.com.

⁴⁹ Government UK, "British Mine Hunting Ships to Bolster Ukrainian Navy as UK and Norway Launch Maritime Support Initiative," Ministry of Defence, 11 December 2023, www.gov.uk.

⁵⁰ P. Biskup, "Poland's Policy Towards the United Kingdom," *Yearbook of Polish Foreign Policy 2022* (in production), PISM, Warsaw 2024.