

**FaR 2021**

**International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”**

**POST-BREXIT UNITED KINGDOM: BETWEEN THE "RED  
LINES" OF PUTIN AND BIDEN**

Sergey V. Krivov (a)\*, Sergey V. Ustinkin (b)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod named after N.A. Dobrolyubov, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia,  
skrivov2@yandex.ru

(b) Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod named after N.A. Dobrolyubov, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia,  
sv.ustinkin@gmail.com

**Abstract**

The article discusses the strategic aspects of the UK's foreign policy after the referendum on leaving the European Union in 2016. It is argued that as a result of Brexit, which represented the seeking of the British political elite for a new role of the United Kingdom in the global security system and within the so-called "collective West", the country's foreign policy ambitions increased and contributed to decisive steps towards positioning itself as one of the key players in the Euro-Atlantic region. At the same time, the coming to power of the Joe Biden administration contributed to a strategic rethinking of transatlantic relations and a departure from the policy of unilateral actions of Donald Trump. The new strategic concept adopted in 2021 as part of the Integrated Review was one of the most notable milestones in British politics since the end of the Cold War. It includes, as an obvious innovation, the development of the Indo-Pacific vector of British foreign policy. The analysis of the UK's foreign policy activity indicates the search for a new role in the changed system of international security and the desire to determine its role in the system of geopolitical aspirations of the new American Administration.

2357-1330 © 2022 Published by European Publisher.

*Keywords:* Brexit, integrated review, global britany, defence strategy, Northern-Eastern flank



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## **1. Introduction**

In his annual message to the Federal Assembly in April 2021, President Putin outlined the "red lines" as a kind of boundaries of what is permissible in the relations of Western countries with Russia (Biden and Putin praise..., 2021). Two months later, the Putin-Baden summit was held in Geneva. According to a number of indirect evidence, the parties "agreed to negotiate". This suggests the transition of the crisis in the Russian-Western relations to a manageable stage (Biden and Putin praise..., 2021). In fact, this means that there are mutual boundaries of what is permissible primarily in the most sensitive areas for both sides.

In this regard, the incident on June 23 in the Black Sea near the coast of Crimea caused a lot of discussion. The problem of the territorial possession of the Crimean Peninsula against the background of Russia's bad relations with Western countries has an obvious provocative character. In fact, the maritime law does not prohibit the so-called innocent passage of both civilian and military vessels through the territorial waters of national States if a number of conditions are observed. However, since April of this year, the passage in the vicinity of Cape Fiolent has been closed by Russia due to military exercises (Russia partially blocked access ..., 2021). What previously could have been overlooked has now become a stumbling block and the issue of non-recognition of the change in the status of the Crimea has become relevant again.

## **2. Problem Statement**

However, what made the United Kingdom, namely its political leadership, to take such an ambiguous step? It is important to take into account both the consequences of the Brexit referendum and the change of political situation after the victory of the Democratic candidate Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election. As a research hypothesis, we assume that the British political leadership tried to test both Putin's red lines and how far the Biden administration is ready to go in maintaining relations with Russia. Perhaps it is important for them to understand their place in the American system of geopolitical priorities. Moreover, the recent steps of the American government rather indicate a shift in priorities towards cooperation with continental Europeans, first of all, with Germany and France. At the same time, it follows that after leaving the EU, the foreign policy ambitions of the British political elite increased. It should be noted here that Brexit is not directly related to Euroscepticism or rejection of European integration as such. Moreover, a number of strata of British society have also suffered from this. Brexit is primarily the desire of the British political elite to rethink the role of the United Kingdom in international politics, the search for a greater role for the country, at least within the framework of the "collective West".

## **3. Research Questions**

As part of our research, we will try to find out the specifics of the British leadership's vision of the place and role of the United Kingdom in the system of international relations and security of recent times. Analyzing the texts of the fundamental documents concerning foreign policy guidelines, we will try to identify how the British foreign policy strategy fits into the general vision of the new world order. Special attention should be paid to the strategic vision of the British-Chinese and British-Russian relations.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article is to identify the features of the United Kingdom's foreign policy in the post-Brexit period and against the background of the transformation of the system of international relations associated with a change in the balance of power in world politics.

#### 5. Research Methods

Within the framework of the research, we combine theoretical and empirical approaches. At the theoretical level, the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR and the fall of pro-Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s pushed the importance of realism away, and at the same time increased the influence of liberal and social schools of constructivism. At the same time, the topic of military security lost most of its significance, although the Copenhagen School and Barry Buzen continued to recognize it along with other aspects of security, such as political, economic, social and environmental (Larivé, 2016). After the Ukrainian events of 2014, as well as the proclamation of the principle of unilateral actions by the Trump administration (2017–2020), rise of skepticism about NATO began to return realism and the "law of force" to international politics (Järvenpää et al., 2019). In particular, the realistic approach to foreign policy is reflected in the IR's departure from the idea that the protection of the so-called "rules-based international system" should be the central organizing principle of foreign policy, which was observed in the previous Reviews of 2010 and 2015. The study used official documents containing the strategic principles of the United Kingdom's foreign policy, as well as expert opinions on various aspects of international relations and security.

#### 6. Findings

In March 2021, the UK government published an *Integrated Review of security, defense, development and foreign policy until 2030*. A few days later, it published an *Additional Defense Strategy* aimed at increasing the UK's military potential. Both documents were the result of a national debate about the international role of the UK after Brexit and contain an ambitious concept of a *Global Britain* – the idea of an innovative country that is more actively engaged in the world in terms of trade, diplomacy and military presence. They were perceived by British experts as the most notable attempt to conceptualize the country's foreign and security policy after the end of the Cold War.

The UK considers Russia as the main challenge to the Euro-Atlantic region, which is necessary to ensure its security, and China – as the number one challenge in the global context. Based on this, it is planned to increase the country's defense potential. It announced the largest increase in its defense spending in recent decades from 40 billion pounds to 47.6 billion pounds in the period from 2020 to 2025, or 2.3 % of GDP (Defence Expenditure..., 2021), as well as the implementation of a technological breakthrough in the development of the Armed Forces, strengthening the nuclear deterrence and strengthening the Navy (Spending Review, 2020).

The concept of a *Global Britain* was promoted by the Conservative Party after the Brexit referendum: the party's manifesto of 2017 proclaimed the UK a global nation with a global history and

future (Forward Together..., 2017). After leaving the EU and due to the change in the balance of power in the global economy, the UK wants to step up its non-European trade, diplomacy and military activities. Thus, it is stated that the UK is already "the 3rd most powerful cyber power in the world, occupying the first place in the field of defense, intelligence, norms and offensive capabilities", and seeks to "ensure (its) the status of a scientific and technical superpower by 2030". It also proclaimed a leading role as a "force for good" in protecting human rights, providing development assistance and solving global problems such as climate change, pandemics or terrorism. Global Britain will continue to rely on a special relationship with the United States, the collective defense of NATO, activity in the United Nations and British soft power. At the same time, the UK considers itself a middle power and seeks to strengthen ties with other middle powers, such as Germany, France and Japan, interested in maintaining an open international order. The Integrate Review indicates the "geopolitical importance of the middle powers", and also suggests that in the conditions of increased competition of the great powers, "the influence of the middle powers is likely to increase in the 2020s, especially when they act together" (Global Britain..., 2021). At the same time, there is unwillingness among officials and the media to openly talk about the UK as a middle power, fearing that it will be considered as "declinist" (Chalmers, 2021).

Moreover, the strategy has faced considerable criticism due to the lack of clear priorities and the discrepancy between geopolitical aspirations and economic opportunities (especially in the context of economic difficulties after Brexit) or the refusal to cooperate in the field of security with the EU (Bond, 2021). In addition, anxiety about the threat from Beijing is combined with the expansion of economic partnership with China as part of efforts to diversify trade after Brexit (Landale, 2021).

From an ideological point of view, the UK increasingly perceives the world as a clash of democratic and authoritarian states, which mainly concerns Russia and China. And the drafters of the document designated the UK as a "soft power superpower", which is "known for its leadership in the field of security, diplomacy and development, conflict resolution and poverty reduction", and is "a beacon of democratic sovereignty and one of the most influential countries in the world". Therefore, along with investing in its own military capabilities, the UK will seek to strengthen and revitalize its global network of military alliances and partnerships.

In security and defense policy, London will continue to rely on close cooperation with the United States on the base of interoperability, defense equipment and within the framework of NATO structures. Here, Great Britain wants to assume the role of a key ally capable of strengthening all flanks – from the Far North, through the Baltic and Black Seas, to the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, it will develop cooperation with Paris and with the smaller Nordic countries within the framework of the *Joint Expeditionary Forces (JEF)* led by it, including contingents from the UK, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries and the Baltic States. The UK also intends to rely on ensuring the security of maritime communication lines and cooperation in the field of anti-submarine warfare in the North Atlantic, so it emphasizes the importance of closer cooperation with the United States, France, the Netherlands and Norway, and also points to Germany as an important ally in Europe. In the new defense strategy, Poland is listed as a key flanking state of NATO, along with Greece, Turkey and Spain. As for cooperation in the field of intelligence, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (the Five Eyes community) will remain the closest partners of the UK.

The UK's bias towards the Indo-Pacific region is one of the main innovations of the Integrated Review. The new strategic documents provide for closer military cooperation within the framework of *Five Powers Defence Agreements* (FPDA) with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, as well as with India, Japan and the Republic of Korea. The Royal Navy will be the main British asset there. The British carrier strike group, maritime patrol vessels (from 2021), the coastal response group (from 2023) and in the future *Type 31* frigates will be periodically deployed to the Indo-Pacific region. In this theater of operations, the UK will focus on purposeful and targeted reinforcement of US and regional allies' operations aimed at ensuring freedom of navigation. In 2018–2019, the UK opened naval bases in Bahrain and Oman. However, given the lessons learned from Afghanistan and Iraq, it seems unlikely that the UK will deploy its ground forces in a long-term operation outside the area in the coming years. The future structure of the British Army is more focused on rapid response than on stabilization efforts (Lindley-French, 2021).

Nevertheless, despite the obvious interest of the UK in the Indo-Pacific region, its military presence will be concentrated in the Scandinavian-Baltic region, which is directly related to its security, and in a broader context, which is the eastern flank of NATO (UK further commits to NATO and European Security..., 2020). The United Kingdom is quite well established in the region, which is manifested in military and political formats, such as the United Expeditionary Forces under the leadership of Great Britain or the Northern Group. It is possible that a stronger commitment of the US Armed Forces to contain China may even increase the demand of allies for a British military presence in the Euro-Atlantic region. The new strategic documents also emphasize the need to ensure freedom of navigation in the Black Sea in cooperation with Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey. Leaving the EU will allow faster and more effective use of sanctions mechanisms against primarily Russia and Belarus. Let us recall the Skripal case, when the UK was unable to push through serious sanctions by the EU forces, convincing the Trump administration to take actions that are more drastic.

## 7. Conclusion

The NATO summit, held in Brussels on June 14, was supposed to demonstrate a return to transatlantic unity after four years of the Trump administration. The restoration of the "collective West" in the face of new challenges from China and Russia puts on the agenda the question of its configuration and the distribution of functional loads between key players. Despite the skeptical assessments of a number of experts regarding the possibility of deploying rapid reaction forces from the United Kingdom in the Baltic and Black Seas, the British presence in world politics and in the creation of the European security architecture will become more noticeable. The analysis of the strategic documents and actions of the United Kingdom indicates the desire of the British political leadership to determine its place in the reformatted new international security system. It is possible that the country's leadership considers the eastern flanks, including the Baltic and Black Seas, as its zone of responsibility, this, in our opinion, is the reason for the activity of Britain in these key regions. Also noteworthy is the desire of the UK to interact with individual European countries, but not with EU structures. This once again proves its desire to position itself as a key partner of the United States on the European continent.

## References

- Biden and Putin praise Geneva summit talks but discord remains. (2021). *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57504755>
- Bond, I. (2021). *Can the UK be secure if Europe is not? The UK's (un)integrated review*. *Center of European Reform*. <https://www.cer.eu/insights/can-uk-be-secure-if-europe-not-uks-unintegrated-review>
- Chalmers, M. (2021). *The Integrated Review: The UK as a Reluctant Middle Power?* RUSI. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/the-integrated-review-the-uk-as-a-reluctant-middle-power>
- Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2021). (2021). NATO, 11 June 2021. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_184844.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_184844.htm?selectedLocale=en)
- Forward Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future. (2017). Conservative and Unionist Party. <https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/conservative-party-manifestos/Forward+Together+-+Our+Plan+for+a+Stronger+Britain+and+a+More+Prosperous....pdf>
- Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. (2021). *Cabinet Office*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>
- Järvenpää, P., Major, C., & Sakkov, S. (2019). *European Strategic Autonomy: Operationalizing a Buzzword*. Tallinn, International Centre for Defence and Security. <https://icds.ee/en/european-strategic-autonomy-operationalising-a-buzzword/>
- Landale, J. (2021). *UK aid budget: Charities call £500m cut a tragic blow*. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-56836430>
- Larivé, M. (2016). *Debating European Security and Defense Policy: Understanding the Complexity*. Routledge.
- Lindley-French, J. (2021). *Global Britain or Little Britain? The Lindley-French Analysis: Speaking Truth unto Power*. <http://lindleyfrench.blogspot.com/>
- Putin, V. V. (2021). *Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly 23 April 2021*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418>
- Russia partially blocked access to the coast of Crimea. (2021). *Gazeta.ru*. 24 April 2021. <http://www.gazeta.ru/army/2021/04/24/13570802.shtml>
- Spending Review. (2020). *HM Treasury*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2020-documents/spending-review-2020>
- The defence equipment plan 2019. (2020). *Ministry of Defence*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-defence-equipment-plan-2019>
- UK further commits to NATO and European Security through JEF Readiness Declaration and deployment of Typhoons to Lithuania. (2020). *Ministry of Defence*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-further-commits-to-nato-and-european-security-through-jef-readiness-declaration-and-deployment-of-typhoons-to-lithuania>