Britain's world:

The strategy of security in twelve geopolitical maps

Edited by:

James Rogers
Andrew Young

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Council on Geostrategy

New geostrategic thinking for a more competitive age

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ANNOTATIONS (SECTIONS 1-12)

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Foreword

FROM THE FIRST SEA LORD

Maps are far more than mere representations of where places lie in relation to one another. As Tim Marshall so aptly puts it, 'The land on which we live has always shaped us. It has shaped the wars, the power, politics, and social development of the peoples that now inhabit nearly every part of the Earth.' This influence extends equally to the seas, which both separate and unite continents, communities, and ideas.

As we navigate an era of mounting strategic complexity, readiness for warfighting remains at the heart of our purpose. The Royal Navy stands prepared not only to deter aggression, but to respond with agility and resolve should conflict arise. The accelerating pace of technological change is reshaping the character of warfare, demanding that we adapt at speed and leverage innovation as a decisive advantage. From autonomous systems to digital integration and next-generation platforms, the Royal Navy is determined to lead, fight, and win in the maritime domain – embracing transformation while sustaining the exceptional leadership, professionalism, and fighting spirit that have long defined our service. This ethos of 'lead, fight, win' underpins our commitment, ensuring that we are always ready to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

In this context, the maritime domain is not merely a battleground, but a pivotal sphere where our security, prosperity, and international standing are continually tested and upheld. The nation's enduring resilience and economic vitality hinge on safeguarding our presence at sea, making maritime capability indispensable. For the Royal Navy, maps serve as invaluable instruments, illuminating strategic geographies and patterns that underpin the United Kingdom's maritime power, and guiding policymakers and industry leaders towards informed, effective decisions.

As First Sea Lord, I have set a bold course for transformation: our fleet will be 'uncrewed wherever possible; crewed only where necessary'. This vision is grounded in the realities of maritime geography: sea lanes, undersea cables, strategic chokepoints, allied presences, and the enduring need to deter, defend, and, when required, defeat threats. The vulnerability of our undersea infrastructure demands that we confront malign state tactics in the depths; much like the pirates of old, attacks on these networks are assaults on civilisation itself.

This atlas provides the strategic community with a common reference point, visualising the flows of trade, energy, and data, as well as the connected and contested waters of the Indo-Pacific and North Atlantic. It illustrates the presence of peer competitors and the geography underpinning alliances. Whether you are guiding industrial investment, defence procurement, supply chain resilience, or the development of allied maritime capability, these maps are crucial. They turn doctrine into terrain, and policy into place.

For Britain, this is not a theoretical matter. As an island nation, we are shaped by the realities of our geography every day – from our regular deterrent patrols and anti-submarine operations to our presence in coastal waters, maritime industries, undersea infrastructure, and export goals. All of these depend on maintaining the integrity of our maritime environment. That is why I encourage you to approach these pages with the same care and attention that we apply to sea control and deterrence.

To reference Marshall again, 'Geography is not fate – humans get a vote in what happens – but it matters.' Geography does not determine outcomes, but until we understand it, our ability to shape events is limited. I recommend this atlas to you. I hope it will support your judgements, inform your decisions, and contribute to the strength of our maritime nation.

GEN. SIR GWYN JENKINS KCB OBE RM
First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff

Introduction

BY JAMES ROGERS AND ANDREW YOUNG

The National Security Strategy is unequivocal: 'we are entering a new era' where the world is being 'reshaped by an intensification of great power competition, authoritarian aggression and extremist ideologies.'[1] The same point is echoed in the Strategic Defence Review, which states explicitly that the United Kingdom (UK) 'and its allies are once again directly threatened by other states with advanced military forces'.[2]

Not since the beginning of the Cold War has the geopolitical situation been as dangerous; in fact, the present environment may more closely resemble the world prior to the First World War – an age of bitter, entrenched rivalry and growing intrigue.

As adversaries strengthen and grow more confident, the British security community needs to focus on the country's geopolitical position and national interests. The UK does not face abstract dangers; it faces palpable threats. Russia has a full-blown offensive underway against Ukraine, which North Korea and Iran are facilitating with troops, munitions, and drones, while the People's Republic of China (PRC) threatens neighbours in pursuit of dubious territorial claims over the South China Sea. In a world where rivals have demonstrated a clear willingness to use force to get their way, it is time to get to grips with what is at stake.

But the sheer scale of the information – growing security threats, changing trade routes, growing resource dependencies, vulnerabilities in systems of communications, the geopolitical thrusts of adversaries, and the rise of new minilateral frameworks, new alliances, and new geographic areas of priority – often overwhelms even the most experienced statesman or strategist. This is where the map, the cartogram, and the infographic become advantageous. They escape the constraints of text to simplify complex geographic information that is often hard to understand.

Geopolitical visualisations are more than just illustrations; they are explanations and arguments. Their hidden strength is that they do not merely show the world. Instead, they frame it, joining the dots in international relations and focusing national concerns. A good map, for example, can instantly reveal a new vulnerability – such as a rival's attempt to dominate a maritime chokepoint – just as it can challenge tired discourses that no longer match reality. By presenting a clear and compelling picture of the strategic environment, such renderings can even rally a nation to action.

The power of maps to shape national perception is not new. The geopolitical cartographers of the early and mid-20th century – from Nicholas Spykman and David H. Cole to Richard Edes Harrison – knew it well. With his maps in *America's Strategy in World Politics* (1942) and *The Geography of the Peace* (1944), Spykman helped the United States (US) to embrace its superpower status, while Harrison, a cartographer for *Fortune* and *Life* magazines, provided the American people with an accessible means to visualise their nation's emerging position at the heart of the modern world (indeed, Harrison produced some of Spykman's maps).

Meanwhile, Cole, in *Imperial Military Geography*, first published in 1924 and printed through 12 editions to 1956, provided a series of maps to help Britons come to terms with their changing geopolitical circumstances, particularly as their country was drawn deeper into Euro-Atlantic affairs. The last edition, containing a beautiful pull-out map of the North Atlantic area, proposed a new direction as the UK went into imperial retreat.

Inspired by these 20th century cartographic visionaries, we offer *Britain's world: The strategy of security in twelve geopolitical maps*. As a result of cooperation between the Council on Geostrategy and the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre, we hope this geopolitical atlas serves as a vital visual companion to the UK's recent defence and national security reviews.

Indeed, the maps, cartograms, and infographics in this atlas are not passive. Some are designed to provoke – to challenge deep-seated assumptions and identify the country's enduring geographic strengths and advantages – while others deliberately highlight Britain's vulnerabilities and the sheer urgency of the threats it faces. Each visualisation, while providing a visual aid in its own right, is annotated by two emerging and/or established experts. The text contextualises each map, cartogram, and infographic, explaining what it depicts and why it is so important.

The atlas is structured in three parts. The first reveals the UK's national powerbase, economic yield, global presence, and data connections. The second part explains how the 'CRINK' nations – the PRC, Russia, Iran, and North Korea – are working more closely together to their collective advantage. While the coordination between these four countries is occasionally overstated, our visualisations offer a fresh perspective of how they are collaborating to replace the prevailing international order with one of their own making.

The final part frames the global footprint and changing orientation of the country's interests. The first map in this section depicts the Royal Navy's ability to deter and to reach key theatres. Three further maps visualise how Britain should shape the world in the mid-21st century in pursuit of its interests. The first provides the broadest and most extensive picture, while the final two reveal how pivotal the British Isles are to the Euro-Atlantic area and the emerging 'Wider North'.

With 12 geopolitical visualisations, our atlas offers a new medium to help inform British statecraft. The conclusion draws them together, assesses the tensions facing the country as it moves towards a sharper and more determined foreign and defence policy, and identifies how a new British geostrategy – focused on seapower – offers the greatest opportunity for strategic success.

Endnotes

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Biographies

- **James Rogers** is Co-founder (Research) at the Council on Geostrategy. Prior to its establishment, he held a range of positions, including at the Baltic Defence College in Estonia and the European Union Institute for Security Studies in France. He is also a Visiting Fellow at the Durham Institute of Research, Development, and Invention (DIRDI).

- **Andrew Young** is Fellowships Officer at the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre and a PhD candidate at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. Previously, he was a commissioned officer in the Royal Navy, where he held a number of roles between 2008 and 2018.

Nuclear power plant
Offshore wind farm
Gas terminal
Oil refinery
Agriculture
Heavy industry
Frontier industry

Principal railway
Major highway
Strategic port

Conurbation (500,000+)
City (200,000+)
Town (100,000+)*

Industrial zones

High technology clusters

North Atlantic

Orkney Islands

Shetland Islands

Gas and oil fields

Outer Hebrides

St. Fergus Gas Terminal

Aberdeen

Scotland

10. Port of Forth
Cargo: 17.2 million tonnes

Central Belt

Electrical cable to Norway

Torness Nuclear Plant

Edinburgh

Glasgow

North Sea

Tyne and Wear

6. Port of Tees and Hartlepool
Cargo: 24.2 million tonnes

Newcastle

Hartlepool Nuclear Plant

Teeside Gas Terminal

Teeside

Electrical cable to Denmark

9. Port of Belfast
Cargo: 18.1 million tonnes

Belfast

Heysham Nuclear Plant

Rampside Gas Terminal

Gas fields

England

2. Port of Grimsby and Immingham
Cargo: 43.7 million tonnes

Northern Ireland

5. Port of Liverpool
Cargo: 31.3 million tonnes

Bradford

Leeds

Hull

Easington Gas Terminal

Liverpool

Manchester

Electrical cable to Republic of Ireland

Merseyside

Irish Sea

Sheffield

Gas fields

Stoke-on-Trent

Derby

Nottingham

Bacton Gas Terminal

Norwich

West Midlands

Leicester

Sizewell Nuclear Plant

Cambridge

Birmingham

Coventry

Wales

Northampton

7. Port of Felixstowe
Cargo: 23.1 million tonnes

Golden triangle

Luton

Oxford

Electrical cable to Netherlands

South Hook LNG Terminal

Electrical cable to Republic of Ireland

Dragon LNG Terminal

Cardiff

Grain LNG Terminal

1. Port of London
Cargo: 51.9 million tonnes

4. Port of Milford Haven
Cargo: 32.9 million tonnes

South Wales

Bristol

Reading

London

Electrical cable to Belgium

8. Port of Dover
Cargo: 19.4 million tonnes

Southampton

Brighton

CHANNEL TUNNEL TO FRANCE

Portsmouth

Electrical cables to France

Solent

Plymouth

Electrical cable to France

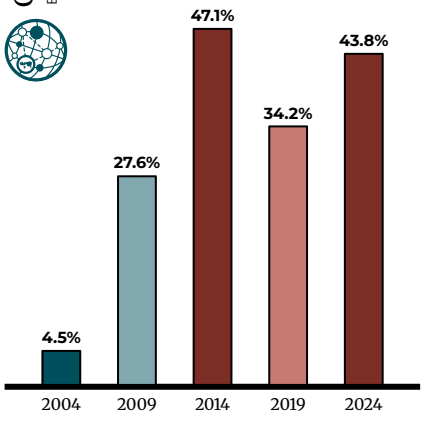
3. Port of Southampton
Cargo: 33.3 million tonnes

Channel Islands

Celtic Sea

English Channel

Isles of Scilly



Energy dependency of the United Kingdom
(Primary fuels and equivalents)

* 50,000+ in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

1. The national powerbase

BY JACK RICHARDSON AND DR MANN VIRDEE

The United Kingdom (UK) is a densely populated island. Since the mid-20th century, the nation's powerbase – its economy, infrastructure, and population nodes – has been concentrated in London and the Southeast, with key settlements around industry, natural resources, and harbours. Overall, the national powerbase is developing particularly in the South while receding in other regions, mainly due to expensive energy and poor connectivity.

Energy provides the basis for any powerbase, but the island of Great Britain is becoming energy-poor. It no longer has the fossil fuel reserves to feed its legacy energy network and has become highly import-dependent. The highest industrial electricity prices in the developed world are undermining the UK's industrial and data bases, and the second-highest domestic electricity prices are sapping wealth.[1]

As the graph shows, the UK is increasingly dependent on imported primary fuels. Nuclear fuel production is principally handled at the Springfields site in Lancashire, but uranium is imported, largely from Canada, Australia, and Kazakhstan. Nine interconnectors provide over 10% of electricity.[2]

UK production of primary oils fell to 31 million tonnes in 2024 – the lowest level since North Sea production began.[3] Domestic refinery production has still not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. With the closure of the Prax Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire, only four major refineries remain. However, Britain does meet the 90-day oil stock requirements of the International Energy Agency.

The UK is also heavily dependent on natural gas due to the closure of its coal plants and dependence on a legacy gas network for most of its heat, but production likewise has fallen to historic lows. 75% of imported gas lands through a single pipeline, the Langeled, posing a significant energy security threat.[4] The rest lands through three Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) facilities, two in South Wales and one in Kent.

The variable renewable energy fleet has expanded dramatically in recent years, with a further expansion set over the coming years. Power generation has been developed far away from the large population centres in England, necessitating extensive grid upgrades. Offshore and onshore infrastructure development will occur, including undersea bootstraps to transfer electricity southward.

Britain's fleet of nuclear power plants will shrink further before some recovery. As the map shows, it now has five operational nuclear power plants: one each at Hartlepool, Torness, and Sizewell, and two at Heysham. If Hinkley Point C in Somerset faces further delays, only Sizewell B will be generating power in 2030. Sizewell C will likely take at least 14 years to start generating electricity. Compounding this is the UK's ageing gas power plant system, with a capacity crunch coming in the years ahead.

Britain's largest population centres are formed around the capital city (London) and its key economic clusters. Over 10% of the UK's population lives in the megalopolis of Greater London and its commuter belt; home to world-class professional services in finance, law, and consulting. These sectors advance Britain's national interests through knowledge building, job growth, wealth creation, and economic leverage.

As the map shows, London also forms one corner of the UK's 'Golden Triangle' – the other two being Cambridge and Oxford. This triangle hosts four of the world's most prestigious universities: Cambridge, Imperial, Oxford, and University College London, putting Britain on par with the United States (US) in terms of academic excellence.[5]

The triangle is also home to other important frontier industries. Cambridgeshire is home to an internationally renowned Life Sciences ecosystem and the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, Europe's largest biotechnology cluster. In Oxfordshire, the Harwell Science and Innovation Campus can perhaps be described as the beating heart of the UK's science and technology ecosystem. London is welcoming new investment from tech firms, particularly in the east and central north of the city.

Policymakers face a dilemma of whether to fund centres of research excellence where they are, thus increasing the concentration of research and research spillover in areas like the Golden Triangle, or whether to use research funding to spread prosperity across the country by channelling resources towards other areas.

With one of the world's most complex economies, Britain is a leading exporter in terms of value, supplying goods such as mechanical power generators, medicinal and pharmaceutical products, cars, aircraft, and scientific equipment.[6] Major UK-based exporters include BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce. BAE Systems has manufacturing facilities across the country, such as in Sheffield (artillery), Glasgow (shipbuilding), and Barrow-in-Furness (nuclear submarines). Rolls-Royce cars are produced at the Goodwood plant in West Sussex, while its aircraft engines and nuclear propulsion systems are produced in Derby.

In the North, stretching from Liverpool on the west coast to Scunthorpe in the East Midlands and Teeside in the Northeast respectively, sit Britain's industrial powerhouses, with population clusters around the large cities, especially Manchester and Leeds. Connecting them to the Southeast is a populated spine, with Birmingham, the second largest city in the UK, roughly in the middle of England. South Wales and Scotland's Central Belt are likewise important population centres with proud industrial histories. Edinburgh, Scotland's capital, has the strongest major city economy in Britain outside of London.[7]

Dispersed across the country are rural communities, clustered around the UK's regions of food production. The nation's breadbasket comprises the rich soils and mild climate of the East of England and Lincolnshire – although these are at risk of unsustainable and irreversible degradation after almost two centuries of intensive agriculture. The parts of the country generally to the west of the Tees–Exe Line are less suitable for arable farming, and provide much of the country's livestock. However, the UK is dependent on imports for almost half of its food.[8]

While London's transport network continually improves, the country suffers from poor transport connectivity outside of the Southeast, which is a significant hindrance to Britain's long-term prosperity. The country that pioneered the steam and jet engine has stagnating infrastructure. Much of the current rail infrastructure follows lines built in the Victorian era. As the map shows, the UK now performs poorly across a range of connectivity metrics. Connections are particularly poor across the Northeast, Scotland, and Wales.

In terms of motorway and highway connectivity, Britain lags behind neighbouring European countries, both in terms of length of motorway per capita and by geographic spread. As the map shows,parts of Wales, Scotland and the East of England are particularly poorly connected to the major areas of industrial activity. Even London suffers: it is consistently ranked as the most congested city in Europe, and one of the world's worst cities for traffic.[9] Congestion increases emissions and reduces economic productivity.

The political and regulatory problems surrounding the construction of the High Speed 2 railway indicates that fast, integrated rail connectivity will be politically difficult to rekindle in the near future. Connectivity even within the Golden Triangle remains poor, despite successive governments pledging to link the cities and create 'Europe's Silicon Valley'. However, some road upgrades are in progress, such as the A428 connecting Cambridge to St Neots, improving links to Bedford and Milton Keynes.

As an island nation, maritime connectivity is critical for the UK. Ports such as Felixstowe and Southampton are vital for container traffic and trade, handling the vast majority of Britain's international trade – despite Felixstowe lacking a modern motorway connection to the Midlands and London. London, Liverpool, and Immingham are likewise important ports for trade, while Aberdeen and the Cromarty Firth are critical for energy.

While still advanced by international standards, the UK's powerbase is in danger of becoming lopsidedly dependent on select frontier and service sectors, while an inefficient, overly import-dependent energy system, and an insufficient transport network are hampering productivity and economic growth. However, Britain's human capital is still globally competitive, and it remains at the forefront of emerging technologies. With reforms, the national powerbase could surge.

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- **Jack Richardson** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy and Head of Policy at Octopus Energy. He was previously Policy Adviser to Claire Coutinho, Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (2023-2024). Before that, he held leadership positions at think tank Onward and at the Conservative Environment Network.

- **Dr Mann Virdee** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy. Previously, he led the Council’s Caudwell Strong Britain programme, exploring how Britain can build a more competitive and resilient science and technology base. Before this, he worked for RAND Europe, the UK Parliament, and the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and IMF.

Council on Geostrategy
Cartogram: James Rogers (© 2025)

One hexagon = £10 billion

6. SCOTLAND
GDP: £204.2 billion
Rank if a country: 49th
Comparable to: **Peru**

11. NORTHEAST
GDP: £77.5 billion
Rank if a country: 69th
Comparable to: **Guatemala**

3. NORTHWEST
GDP: £270.8 billion
Rank if a country: 43rd
Comparable to: **Colombia**

8. YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER
GDP: £182.5 billion
Rank if a country: 54th
Comparable to: **Greece**

9. EAST MIDLANDS
GDP: £157.0 billion
Rank if a country: 57th
Comparable to: **Qatar**

12. NORTHERN IRELAND
GDP: £63.3 billion
Rank if a country: 74th
Comparable to: **Croatia**

4. EAST
GDP: £229.3 billion
Rank if a country: 47th
Comparable to: **Finland**

7. WEST MIDLANDS
GDP: £195.2 billion
Rank if a country: 51st
Comparable to: **Kazakhstan**

1. LONDON
GDP: £617.9 billion
Rank if a country: 21st
Comparable to: **Poland**

10. WALES
GDP: £92.8 billion
Rank if a country: 62nd
Comparable to: **Ecuador**

GDP per capita

- £60,000+
- £40,000–£59,999
- £35,000–£39,999
- £30,000–£34,999
- £25,000–£29,999

2. SOUTHEAST
GDP: £391.8 billion
Rank if a country: 27th
Comparable to: **United Arab Emirates**

5. SOUTHWEST
GDP: £207.6 billion
Rank if a country: 49th
Comparable to: **Portugal**

2. Economic output

BY CHRIS HAGUE AND DR CARL S. P. HUNTER OBE

The need to increase defence spending to meet growing threats is not just a necessity for the United Kingdom's (UK) national security. It represents a golden opportunity to address one of the most significant socio-economic and political challenges facing Britain in recent decades: regional inequality caused by de-industrialisation.

On 12th November 1936, Stanley Baldwin, then prime minister, spoke in the House of Commons to lament that the British public would not have backed his rearmament efforts if he went into an election requesting this mandate.[1] The Baldwin government's rearmament efforts were smothered with fiscal 'rationing' by His Majesty's (HM) Treasury to reduce costs.

Following the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022, it has taken over three years to see the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) finally commit to raising core defence spending to 3.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – but not until 2035, 13 years after the Kremlin's intended week-long 'special military operation' began.[2]

While Russia's imperialism makes it easy to draw parallels to the 1930s, the UK is far better prepared today. Its security is guaranteed by its Continuous At-Sea Deterrent (CASD) and NATO membership. If the worst was to come, Russia's economy is over 11 times smaller than the collective economies of NATO allies, excluding the United States (US).[3] However, the Russian threat nevertheless remains real.

As the cartogram shows,the British economy is dominated by London, whose GDP is comparable to the economy of Poland, and nearly £50 billion greater than the combined economic output of the UK's bottom five regions.

The de-industrialisation of key industries that powered much of Britain during the Industrial Revolution and two world wars ripped the soul out of communities outside London and the Southeast. From coal mining in County Durham and Rotherham to the steelworks of Sheffield and Newport, alongside the mill towns of Oldham and Bolton, many communities have never recovered from de-industrialisation – causing a multigenerational crisis and a lack of opportunities in these areas.

As a result of this, there is also a significant inequality of productivity across the UK. Both London and the Southeast outperform the national average, while the Northeast and Wales, the two regions with the lowest GDP per capita, also have the lowest productivity.

Moreover, productivity growth across Britain has a very different distribution. The Northwest and Northern Ireland are the fastest growing regions, while London actually decreased in productivity between 2019 and 2023.[4] Improved productivity per worker corresponds to increases in GDP per capita, and is thus the best means of generating economic hope for individuals.

The prize presented by increased British defence spending is that the defence industry is almost the mirror image of the regional economic output imbalance. Nearly seven in ten defence jobs are found outside London and the Southeast, and overwhelmingly outside the main cities.[5] In the Northwest, which, as noted on the cartogram, has an overall economic output comparable to Colombia, a third of the workforce in Barrow-in-Furness are employed at the local shipyard, building nuclear-powered submarines. Lancashire is the centre of the UK's military aerospace industry, supporting 12,000 highly skilled jobs.[6]

In Scotland, which has an overall economic output comparable to Peru, Glasgow and Fife are home to Britain's shipbuilding industry, constructing Royal Navy warships and employing more than 12,000 people in shipbuilding across the region.[7] This persists in spite of the near total decline of what was historically an industry in which the UK, in particular this region alongside the Northeast, Northwest, and Northern Ireland, was world-leading.

The Northeast, which has an economic output comparable to Guatemala – one of the poorest economies in Latin America (although nearly seven times more populous than the Northeast) – is home to a rich tapestry of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), delivering key capabilities to the British Armed Forces. This includes Middlesbrough's Analox, which delivers vital submarine life support equipment to the Royal Navy and allied navies across the world, and OpenWorks Engineering, which has doubled its workforce in 2025 to deliver

innovative Counter-Uncrewed Aerial Systems (C-UAS) capabilities.

However, defence alone is no silver bullet to the mammoth problem of regional inequality. Currently, 272,000 industry jobs in the UK are supported by defence spending: a figure which is significantly lower than the sum of the 187,000 coal industry workers at the time of the 1984 miners' strike, 167,000 steel workers by 1981, and 850,000 employed in the textiles industry during its downturn in the mid-1970s.[8] Defence must work in tandem, not only with industry and dual-use companies, but also with universities – of which Britain boasts four of the world's top ten – in order to ensure that the UK derives the greatest advantage from being one of the world's most scientifically advanced nations.

It is for this reason that HM Government's Industrial Strategy, published in June 2025, positions defence among seven other high-growth sectors as priorities for future policymaking. However, they are not mutually exclusive.

The mobile telephone in your pocket can be traced back to the dark days of the Second World War, when the Allies faced the urgent need to gain an advantage by cracking German codes. The origins of Hinkley Point C, which is currently being constructed in Somerset to power six million homes with zero-carbon electricity, can be traced to the Trinity nuclear test in the deserts of New Mexico. Passenger jets can be linked to the work of Sir Frank Whittle, who invented the first gas-turbine engine to help defend Britain's skies.

These 'spillovers' from defence can bring whole-of-society benefit through the economic opportunities they release, as well as their concentration in areas outside London and the Southeast.

Defence Research and Development (R&D) could once again deliver the next great step forward for the UK's economy in frontier industries – such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum computing, and engineering biology – providing not just the capabilities needed to defend Europe, but also laying the foundations for tomorrow's economy.

This annotation began by drawing parallels between the challenges faced in 2025 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the challenges faced by Baldwin in 1936, yet it could be just as easily argued that Britain faces another 1945 moment. Together with the US, the UK built the prevailing international order – including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, an equal-member Commonwealth, the United Nations (UN), and NATO itself – to ensure international security and provide successive generations with stability, security, and prosperity, both at home and overseas.

This is a moment not of pessimism, but of optimism that Britain can step out of the shadow of regional inequality, division, and socio-economic stagnation, and shape the country of tomorrow – just as Clement Attlee's post-war government shaped the identity of the 21st century UK with the National Health Service (NHS), the welfare state, and NATO.

Britain should not waste this moment. The need to increase investment in defence should not just be seen as a cost, as HM Treasury saw it in the 1930s, but should be viewed as a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the UK and its allies and partners to define the rest of the century. If Britain fails to rise to this moment, or lacks the clear vision needed, adversaries and competitors will not hesitate to provide an alternative.

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8. For statistics, see: 'MOD supported employment estimates 2023/24', Ministry of Defence, 03/07/2025, https://www.gov.uk/ (checked: 24/11/2025); Georgina Morris, 'Miners' strike 1984: Why UK miners walked out and how it ended', BBC, 02/03/2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/ (checked: 24/11/2025); 'Updated: The British steel industry since the 1970s', Office for National Statistics, 18/01/2016, https://www.ons.gov.uk/ (checked: 24/11/2025); and 'The Textile Industries: Volume 359', *Hansard*, 23/04/1975, https://hansard.parliament.uk/ (checked: 24/11/2025).

Biographies

- **Chris Hague** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy, and Senior Policy and Communications Manager at Make UK Defence. He played a key role in the Labour Party's defence team, working alongside The Rt. Hon. John Healey MP, and worked on the International Policy Team before the 2024 general election.

- **Dr Carl Stephen Patrick Hunter OBE** is Chairman of Coltraco Ultrasonics; Director of the Centre for Underwater Acoustic Analysis; Director-General of the Durham Institute of Research, Development, and Invention (DIRDI); and Professor-in-Practice at the University of Durham. He is also Honorary Chair of the Council on Geostrategy's Whitehall Briefings, Sea Power Series, and Geostrategy Forums.

Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) created

The Department for International Development is merged to ensure Official Development Assistance ('foreign aid') better serves the national interest.

Integrated Review Refresh

In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a new strategic framework is established to push back against geopolitical revisionists.

2020 — 2021 — 2023 — 2025

Integrated Review

New strategy to focus British efforts in an age defined increasingly by systemic competition and geopolitical rivalry.

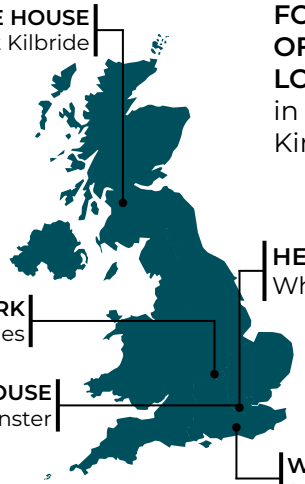
National Security Strategy

With the election of a new government in June 2024, the strategic framework is further refined to strengthen Britain's position and asymmetric advantage.

High Commission or Embassy

Embassy-in-being

FOREIGN OFFICE LOCATIONS in the United Kingdom



ABERCROMBIE HOUSE
East Kilbride

HEAD OFFICE
Whitehall

HANSLOPE PARK
Milton Keynes

LANCASTER HOUSE
Westminster

WILTON PARK
Steyning

TURKS AND CAICOS
Capital: Cockburn Town
Population: c. 49,300
GDP: £1.31 billion

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS
Capital: Road Town
Population: c. 39,800
GDP: £1.13 billion

BERMUDA
Capital: Hamilton
Population: c. 63,350
GDP: £6.42 billion

CAYMAN ISLANDS
Capital: George Town
Population: c. 88,800
GDP: £5.15 billion

SOVEREIGN BASES
Capital: Episkopi
Population: c. 18,195
GDP: N/A

ANGUILLA
Capital: The Valley
Population: c. 14,870
GDP: £312 million

GIBRALTAR
Capital: Gibraltar
Population: c. 34,000
GDP: £2.91 billion

MONTSERRAT
Capital: Brades
Population: c. 4,300
GDP: £59.9 million

PITCAIRN ISLANDS
Capital: Adamstown
Population: 35
GDP: c. £0.165 million

INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY
Capital: Diego Garcia
Population: c. 4,000
GDP: N/A

Ascension Island

St. Helena

Tristan da Cunha

FALKLAND ISLANDS
Capital: Stanley
Population: c. 3,540
GDP: £391.81 million

SOUTH GEORGIA
Capital: King Edward Point
Population: 10-20
GDP: N/A

MID-ATLANTIC ISLANDS
Capital: St. Helena
Population: c. 5,000
GDP: c. £45 million

BRITISH ANTARCTICA
Capital: Rothera
Population: 400 (Summer)
GDP: N/A

TOP TEN RECIPIENTS OF BRITISH OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE IN 2024 (£ MILLION)

1.	Ukraine	270
2.	Afghanistan	192
3.	Ethiopia	182
4.	Syria	158
5.	Somalia	143
6.	Yemen	142
7.	Sudan	141
8.	West Bank and Gaza Strip	138
9.	Nigeria	138
10.	South Sudan	132

3. Global Britain

BY BENEDICT BAXENDALE-SMITH AND MATTHEW PALMER

The United Kingdom (UK) maintains an expansive global reach due to its large diplomatic footprint, with more than 220 posts including embassies, high commissions, and consulates found in over 160 countries across six continents.[1] His Majesty's Diplomatic Service (HMDS) is responsible for the representation of British interests within the borders of allies, partners, competitors, and adversaries, while simultaneously fostering international collaboration on diplomatic, trade, and security issues.

This responsibility also applies to the 14 British Overseas Territories (BOTs) highlighted on the map. With a total population exceeding 270,000, the BOTs extend from Antarctica and the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic Ocean to the warmer climes of the British Indian Ocean Territory, Bermuda, and the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia. Each with diverse interests and neighbours, the BOTs exist within their own security environments. This requires unique applications of national power, ranging from Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to hard power. The Falklands, for instance, hosts joint capabilities across land, sea, and air.

HMDS missions therefore have a multifaceted remit: providing points of contact; acting as listening posts to provide the UK with on-the-ground information on foreign affairs; flying the flag for the country; and promoting officially sanctioned soft power.

As the ability to attract and influence others, soft power remains an important component of national power. Despite the 'new era of threat' and the primacy of hard power – characterised by the global trend of rearmament – the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and soft power remains a vital tool of international influence.

A soft power success story is the Commonwealth, a British-led multilateral organisation comprising 56 independent nations and accounting for roughly 32% of the global population. At its head is His Majesty King Charles III, who serves as sovereign for 15 members including the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica, and Papua New Guinea. While not sovereign British territories, the Commonwealth is another example of the UK's ability to convene at a global scale and forge collaborative programmes on myriad shared interests.

Although somewhat fashionable, it is a mistake to deride soft power completely. Ukraine's ability to garner support across much of the world in 2022 was thanks to excellent use of soft power and communication. In times of crisis, great powers will scramble for support from neutral nations – not least for resources – and as such, non-aligned nations are more likely to be amenable to nations with which they have a positive relationship. The effective implementation of soft power strengthens alliances and relationships, facilitates trade, and makes it more likely that, in difficult times, nations will come to Britain's support.

As multipolarity continues to evolve, the UK's exposure to threat increases globally, owing to its custodianship over the BOTs and overseas military facilities. This ensures that Britain will forever have global interests and responsibilities for their defence and security. The UK should therefore continue to leverage increasing hard power capabilities combined with soft power influence to ensure its interests remain protected.

Central to this effort is the Integrated Global Defence Network (IGDN) – often hosted in-country by HMDS – which facilitates international engagement by Britain on defence and security. Roughly 8,500 Ministry of Defence (MOD) personnel are stationed overseas, spread across eight British Defence Staffs, six army training estates, and six permanent overseas bases, or 'hubs'.[2] Included in this are more than 90 defence attachés and advisers assigned to supplement diplomatic missions. This enables bespoke integration and collaboration with overseas militaries, governments, and industries. For instance, AUKUS and the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) stand as two examples of international capability development programmes, supported in-country by the IGDN.

Defence diplomacy will remain critical for the foreseeable future. Beyond courting investment and pursuing joint procurement, maintaining working relationships with allies, partners, and non-aligned states will be critical to ensuring territorial overflight and maritime access. For the BOTs and the millions of Britons living abroad, unfettered access via air and sea is vital for responding to emergencies. The Sovereign Bases

of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, for example, have long facilitated the evacuation of British citizens from regional hotspots and supported combat operations in the Middle East.

Multipolarity, however, is not just a contest of arms. All elements of national power will be required to ensure the UK's survival and economic prosperity. On the latter, ensuring the British economy remains competitive amid a changing trade landscape necessitates the continuous leveraging of its global presence. For example, the UK's ability to secure a favourable tariff agreement with the United States (US) was the result of an extensive in-country diplomatic effort, made possible by a strong bilateral relationship built upon shared experience, individual professional relationships, and an innate understanding of the American political system.

This effort is replicated worldwide, as Britain seeks to weather the changing nature of international trade, continuing the pursuit of international deals post-Brexit. The UK-India Free Trade Agreement, signed in July 2025, is a prime example, alongside ongoing negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council, South Korea, Switzerland, and Turkey. National power, and the functions of the civil service therein, is therefore focused through international postings to engage and pursue mutual benefit. Selling Britain as a reliable partner with global interests, based in part on the successful invocation of soft power, is fundamental to this.

It is for this reason that the decision by consecutive British governments to cut funding for its main sources of soft power should be re-examined. In many countries, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) remains one of the most trusted sources of information and a key element of British soft power. Yet, it is losing audiences in Africa to well-funded Chinese and Russian competitors. The English Premier League is the most-watched sports league on the planet and followed fervently in many parts of the world, yet little is made of this fact to bolster the UK's interests abroad.

Hefty cuts to ODA have led to a sharp reduction in funding for programmes tackling long-term upstream issues such as climate change, health, water scarcity, and lack of economic opportunity. Instead, programmes which address either key domestic political concerns or direct security threats are likely to be prioritised – hence why the largest share of the ODA budget (approximately 20%) is currently spent on refugees in donor countries (i.e., in Britain), and why Ukraine is currently the largest single overseas recipient of ODA. As a result, ODA spending will also likely continue the trend of becoming increasingly bilateral, rather than donated through multilateral institutions.[3]

Indeed, with the reduction in ODA funding, there is a likelihood that British aid will become increasingly securitised, generated through programmes such as the Integrated Security Fund (ISF). While not a concern in itself – the ISF funds excellent work in conflict areas – it does mean that the UK may lose expertise and influence in areas which are not explicitly security-related. This is particularly the case considering that other nations, such as the US and Germany, are also cutting overseas development funding, which offers a window of opportunity for Britain to step into the breach – at least from an expertise perspective – and partly fill the vacuum which might otherwise be dominated by other, less friendly nations.

In a more fractured and dangerous world, the UK needs to maximise every ounce of its strength to remain safe, secure, and prosperous at a global level.

Endnotes

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2. ‘Strategic Defence Review 2025 — Making Britain Safer: Secure at home, strong abroad’, Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, https://www.gov.uk/ (checked: 24/11/2025).
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Biographies

- **Matthew Palmer** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy and a former British Army officer with deployed operational experience in the Middle East and Europe. He has a BA from the University of Oxford and is currently undertaking an MSc at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

- **Benedict Baxendale-Smith** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy and a doctoral researcher in the Department of Defence Studies at King’s College London. Previously, he worked for a Member of Parliament, and held a position at the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington, DC.

United States
Canada
Greenland (Den.)
Arctic Ocean
North Atlantic
Iceland
FARICE-1
Norway
Connector
Cable
TRANSATLANTIC CABLES
Amitié
Apollo (x 2)
Atlantic Crossing 1 (x 2)
EXA Express
EXA North and South (x 2)
FLAG Atlantic 1 (x 2)
Grace Hopper
Tata TGN-Atlantic South
Yellow
CABLES TO EUROPE
Circe (North / South)
Concerto
Cross Channel Fibre
Farland North
Iceni
IOEMA (from 2029)
Mercator
NO-UK
North Sea Connect
Pan European Crossing (UK-Belgium)
Pan European Crossing (UK-Ireland)
Q&E (North / South)
Scylla
SHEFA 2
Tampnet (North / South)
Tangerine
Tata TGN-Western Europe
Ulysses 2
Zeus
Germany
France
Spain
Italy
Glo-1
Greece
Japan
South Korea
People's Republic of China
Senegal
Libya
Iraq
Egypt
Pakistan
India
FLAG Europe-Asia
Saudi Arabia
Ivory Coast
Ghana
Nigeria
Sudan
Oman
Thailand
Malaysia
INDO-PACIFIC CABLES
Europe India Gateway
FLAG Europe-Asia
CABLES TO REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Beaufort (from 2027)
CeltixConnect 1 and 2
Emerald Bridge Fibres
ESAT-2
Geo-Eirgrid
Rockabill
Sirius South
Solas
2Africa
Gabon
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Somalia
2Africa
Kenya
Angola
Tanzania
Seychelles
South Atlantic
Comoros
Mozambique
Madagascar
South Africa
DOMESTIC CABLES
BT Highlands and Islands (x 20)
BT-MT 1
Channel Islands 9
E-LLAN
Isles of Scilly Cable
Lanis 1, 2, and 3
Manx-Northern Ireland
Northern Lights
R100 North
Scotland-Northern Ireland 3 and 4
Sirius North
Undersea Guernsey (HUGO)
UK-Channel Islands 7 and 8
Indian Ocean
DOMESTIC UNDERSEA CABLES
Shetland Islands
North Atlantic
Scotland
United Kingdom
Northern Ireland
North Sea
Irish Sea
Wales
Celtic Sea
Isles of Scilly
England
English Channel
Channel Islands
Council on Geostrategy

4. Undersea cables

BY PROF. JAMES BERGERON AND CHARLOTTE KLEBERG

Undersea cables underpin modern life. In the 19th century, such cables enabled first transatlantic then global communications. Britain was at the forefront of their laying, which culminated in the All Red Line. The subsequent advent of fibre optics in the mid-1980s made possible an incredible expansion in data, creating the possibility of the modern internet and cloud computing.

The implications of this connectivity revolution are immense, both worldwide and for the United Kingdom (UK) as an island nation with a globally connected digital economy. Carrying over 97% of global telecommunications, undersea information cables support vital data flows for sectors which depend on real-time information. 99% of Britain's data transmission relies on 60 major subsea cables, including 45 providing international links.[1] Approximately £1.15 trillion in financial transactions are facilitated globally via these networks daily, with British and American cable links not only fusing the City of London and Wall Street, but also major European financial houses and markets to their North American counterparts.[2]

The UK's reliance on this network goes beyond finance. The undersea network has transcended simple communication to enable the British economy and way of life. Without the internet and the cloud, air and maritime transport would be disrupted, critical aspects of the National Health Service (NHS) could not function, pay would not arrive in current accounts, and supermarket shelves would be empty. Any widespread disruption could threaten national security.

As shown on the map, the UK's geographic position makes it a global connectivity hub. There is a plethora of connections to the European continent, as well as the great transatlantic link between Britain and North America which facilitates data traffic for much of Europe. Additionally, the UK plays a special role in connectivity to Africa and the Indo-Pacific region, and also sees a significant concentration of cable landings. As data traffic increases alongside the digital economy, the density and reach of this network will continue to expand. A significant disruption to this network would have wide-ranging effects beyond British shores.

An adversary will appreciate that the cable map depicts the vector of the UK's strategic alliances and partnerships as much as its raw communications. Britain's status as a hub makes for geopolitical influence and leverage, but also exposes it to hostile activities, such as sabotage and espionage.

Undersea cables have been targets of armed conflict and great power competition since their inception. Nations have monitored, surveilled, and tapped adversary networks, particularly during the Cold War. The importance of those networks today would make a disruption akin to a major military attack in terms of its effects on life, society, and economy.

The UK is well served by a strong and resilient network of cables, providing redundancy. Accidental damage from weather or (innocent) anchor dragging is unlikely to threaten Britain's network significantly. A more concerted effort to cut several key data cables simultaneously would be required.

Difficult to monitor and protect, undersea information cables are vulnerable to deliberate disruption, with Russia presenting a particular challenge. In conflict with Ukraine, it seeks to dissuade North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and European Union (EU) states from supporting Kyiv. With its land forces drained, maritime activity presents an attractive means of sub-threshold action. Furthermore, the Kremlin has made it clear that it does not see a sharp distinction between peace and war, but rather a continuity. Its current efforts are aimed at structural damage, below the threshold of the UK's willingness to escalate.

The essence of this strategy is implausible deniability. While some incidents arise from accidents and negligence, others are suspicious but undetermined. This difficulty of attribution, combined with the challenges of monitoring and protection, makes the undersea domain well-suited to sub-threshold tactics. For example, a series of anchor dragging incidents in the Baltic Sea caused damage to undersea cables in winter 2024-2025.[3] These involved ships of the Russian 'shadow fleet' and other sanctions evaders – a fleet which has proliferated after the imposition of oil sanctions on Russia in 2022.

These sub-standard commercial vessels – operating outside the free and open international order and established shipping frameworks – pose a growing threat, not only to the environment and maritime order, but also to Critical Undersea Infrastructure (CUI). With over 1,000 vessels, this trade accounts for almost one fifth of the global tanker fleet, and overlaps with undersea cable sabotage incidents as well as reports of covert use for military surveillance through cable tapping.[4]

Such sub-threshold action is only half the story, however. The Yantar, a Russian 'research vessel', alongside similar ships and their submersibles, have probed European undersea cables for years, with clear military intent. Whether this is mapping, tapping, or laying the foundations for disruption remains unknown.

As both state and non-state actors seek strategic advantage in the subsea domain, Britain should adopt a comprehensive approach, combining enhanced and innovative maritime security capabilities, public-private collaboration and coordination, and international cooperation.

Expanding maritime security capabilities will be critical. While assets such as RFA Proteus, the Royal Navy's Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance Ship, are important, they are insufficient. The resources required to protect CUI face competing demands from other defence commitments and priorities. This makes it crucial to look to innovative uses of existing capabilities, as well as deploying new technology, uncrewed systems, and advanced sensors.

Within NATO, British efforts in support of Operation BALTIC SENTRY help to contain and counter threats in the Baltic Sea, as does the UK's leadership of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). NATO's Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) ensures that the alliance can maintain a watch on Russian research and surveillance efforts in the North Sea and North Atlantic. The JEF represents a successful format for responding to undersea cable incidents, with regular exercises, information sharing, and rapid response protocols in place. This includes the dispatch of air and sea assets to investigate suspicious vessel activity.

As naval resources are scarce, and undersea cable networks are vast, extensive public-private collaboration is needed. Most cables are privately owned and operated, which makes close coordination between government, defence, and industry stakeholders essential. Establishing formal mechanisms for threat assessments, incident responses, and exercises will improve readiness. Strategic partnerships can also help to ensure that commercial considerations align – to the greatest extent possible – with national security objectives.

Responses to incidents are complicated by international law, governance, and the number of stakeholders involved. Information sharing, while critical, is challenged by technical, commercial, and trust barriers. In Britain, responsibilities and regulation are fragmented across various agencies and departments, creating coordination challenges and underscoring the need for cross-agency collaboration and clearer roles.

Furthermore, in connecting different countries and territorial waters, undersea cable networks are subject to different legal regimes, complicating both oversight and response. At sea, malign actors operate with minimal accountability. The complexity of this landscape has urged several countries to push for updating international maritime law to strengthen protections of subsea infrastructure.

As the UK's reliance on undersea cables grows, so too does the risk from hostile actors exploiting the opacity of the subsea domain to inflict damage below the threshold of open conflict. Protecting these vital networks will require an integrated approach combining stronger surveillance, faster responses, and closer international cooperation between government, industry, and allies alike.

Endnotes

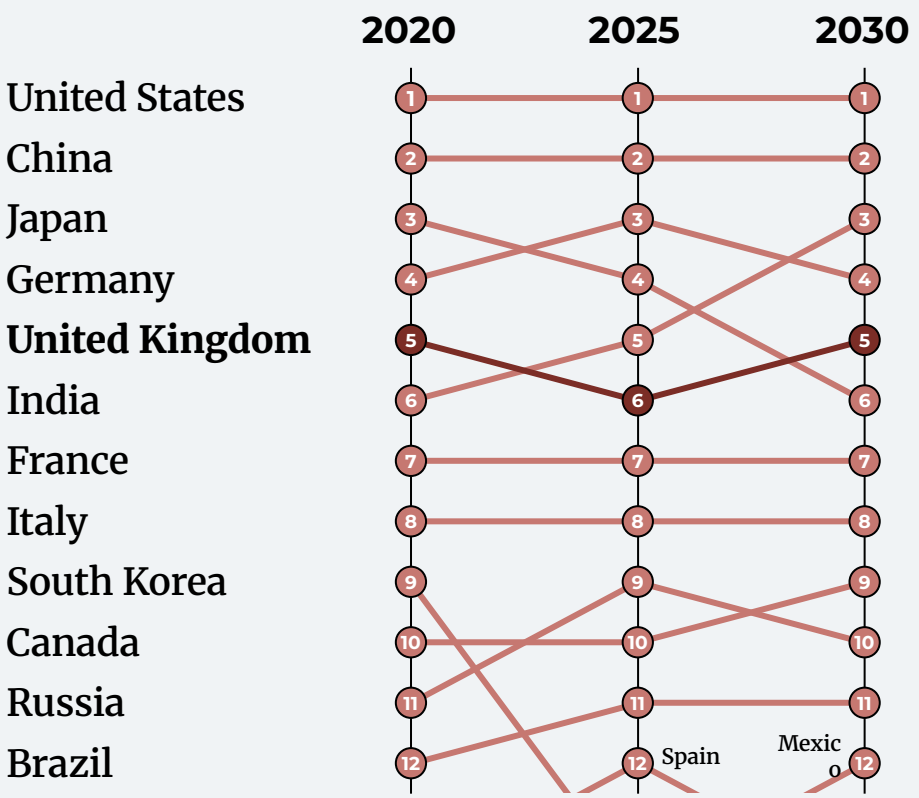
1. 'Undersea cables', European Union Agency for Cyber Security, 31/08/2023, https://www.enisa.europa.eu/ (checked: 24/11/2025).
2. 'Subsea telecommunications cables: resilience and crisis preparedness', Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (UK Parliament), 19/09/2025, https://publications.parliament.uk/ (checked: 24/11/2025).
3. Katharina Buchholz, 'Baltic Sea Cable Incidents Pile Up – Who Is To Blame?', *Forbes*, 31/01/2025, https://www.forbes.com/ (checked: 24/11/2025).
4. Henri van Soest, 'Countering Russia's "Shadow Fleet"', *The National Interest*, 16/01/2025, https://nationalinterest.org/ (checked: 24/11/2025).

Biographies

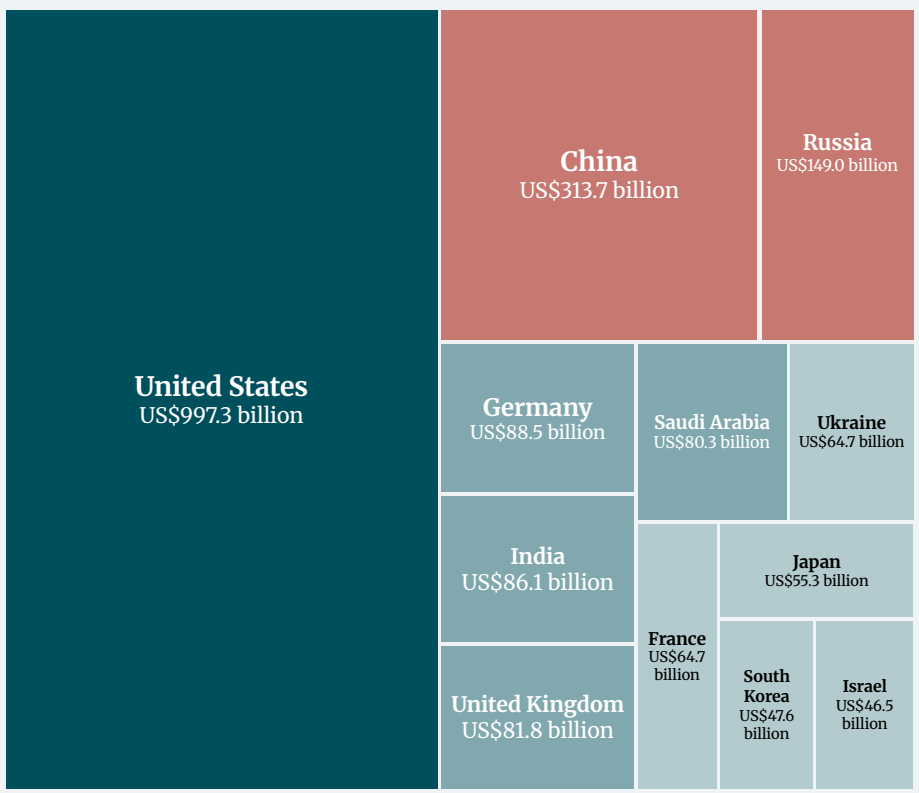
- **Prof. James Bergeron** is an International Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy and Political Adviser to the Commander at NATO MARCOM. Previously, he served as a foreign policy adviser to ten senior American and NATO commanders, including as Political Adviser to the Commander for Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO.

- **Charlotte Kleberg** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy. She holds various project and board advisory roles in the Roll-on, Roll-off (Ro-Ro) shipping sector through Wallenius Lines, Wallenius Marine and United European Car Carriers, and is also an Associate Fellow of the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre.

12 largest economies (GDP)

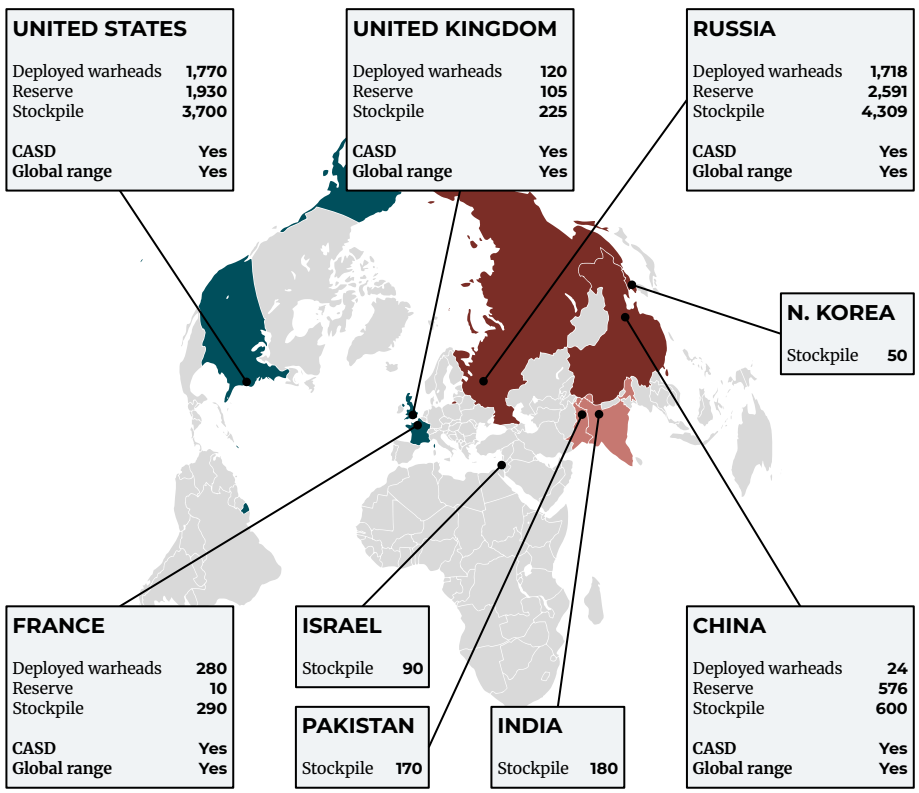


12 biggest defence spenders

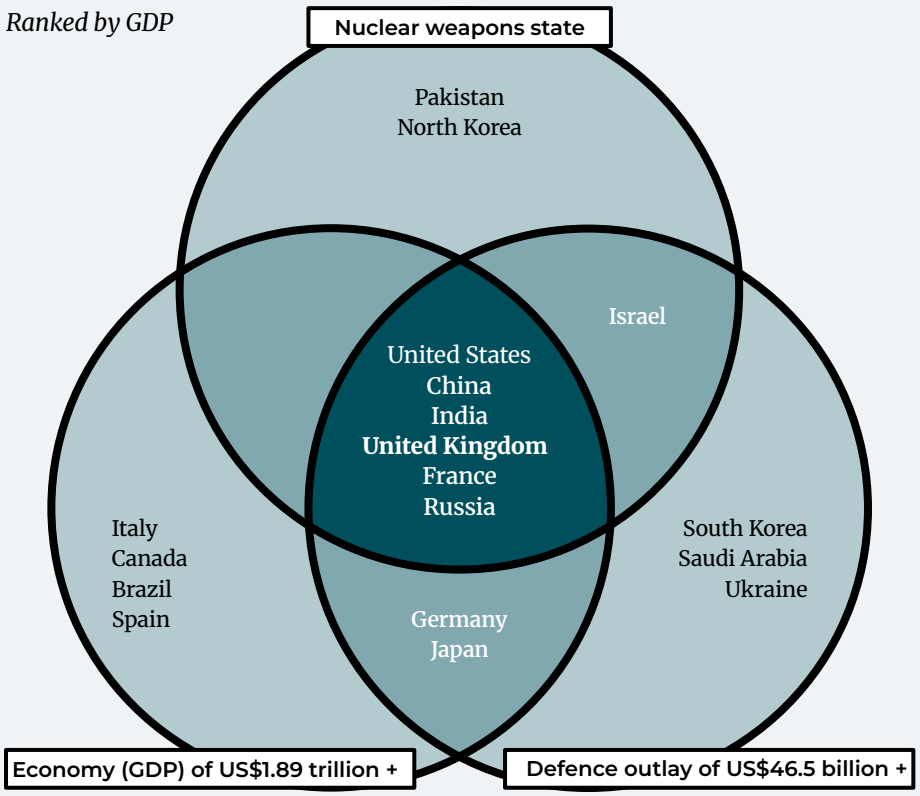


Nuclear arsenals

Council on Geostrategy
Base map: WorldMapGenerator (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



The major powers in 2025



5. Centres of world power

BY JAMES ROGERS AND PATRICK TRIGLAVCANIN

The fall of the Soviet Union bred hope that geoeconomics and soft power would replace geopolitical calculation. Today, such optimism looks outlandish. With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the world has received a stark lesson: power is central to international relations. Without power, democratic nations are vulnerable to adversaries who may destabilise them, annex their territory, or even wipe them from the map.

Russia is not the only state to have gone on the warpath. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is expanding its influence across the South China Sea and the Himalayas, Iran is destabilising its neighbours, and Venezuela is threatening neighbouring Guyana. Rightly or wrongly, each has calculated that they can prevail at an acceptable cost.

But what is national power? Until the end of the Cold War, industrial strength was seen as critical. More recent academic innovations have focused on net or surplus power (i.e., what remains for external projection once a country accounts for domestic costs).[1] However, working out an answer is next to impossible; the data needed is simply unavailable. Then there is the issue of geopolitical context – forms of power that matter in one period may matter less in another.

In today's geopolitical landscape, three elements of power stand out. Sheer economic gravity clearly matters, although this can mask underlying realities. What if a country is merely a petrostate, or develops 'Dutch disease' – when new resources are discovered but their exploitation, while generating a quick bounty, reduces the complexity of a country's economic activity over time? Equally, a wealthy nation does not necessarily make for a powerful one. Germany and Japan have been rich for decades, but few live in trepidation of their commands.

Its limitations notwithstanding, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) provides some indication of economic weight. Here, the United States (US) and the PRC stand in a league of their own.[2] Additionally, while the economic gravity of India – and other developing countries, such as Brazil and Mexico – is rising fast, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), and the wider Group of Seven (G7) remain in the top ten. The balance of economic power is also changing within the developed world: as Japan and South Korea plunge, Britain is projected to re-emerge as the world's fifth-largest economy by 2030.[3]

If GDP serves for foundational strength, investment in defence helps to indicate a nation's external reach. However, a large military budget may not make a country powerful if it prioritises territorial defence, or fails to work in symbiosis with its own geography. A balance must be struck: a military buildup today may jeopardise the economy of the future, while trading guns for a more comfortable life today may invite aggression tomorrow.

20 years ago, the UK and US combined spent more on defence than the rest of the world put together.[4] But today, as the treemap shows, Britain has fallen out of the top five investors, and America no longer accounts for as much of the world's share as it once did due to large Chinese, Russian, and German increases. And the PRC is growing fast: in 2000, the US spent over 14 times more on defence than the Chinese; today, the Americans spend just over three times as much.[5]

Then there are nuclear weapons. Even 80 years after the first atomic burst, these devices are potent statements of national technological sophistication and/or political resolve. They guarantee their owners a degree of sovereignty that nothing else can match. As the small map shows, only a handful of countries possess nuclear weapons, and, with the exception of the US and Russia, only in relatively small numbers.[6]

Yet, whether more nuclear weapons enhance national power is an open question: the size of the Kremlin's arsenal hardly matters when Britain can still level every major Russian population centre. Here, what really matters is the means of delivery. While the smallest of nuclear powers – such as Israel and North Korea – can still deter, those possessing guaranteed second-strike delivery systems with global range have the greatest leverage.

Taken together, these attributes provide the three elements of a Venn diagram to determine the centres of world power. The qualifiers for inclusion are being among the 12 largest economies, the 12 largest defence spenders, or a nuclear power. Six countries stand above the rest – the US, the PRC, the UK, India, Russia, and France – because they meet all three

criteria. In principle, they are the great powers of the mid-21st century.

However, the strength and depth of a nation's relationships, its ability to provide discursive and regulatory leadership, and its capacity to leverage its reputation for strategic effect must also be considered. While less tangible than gravitational and instrumental power, structural power can elevate a major power's international standing.

Take the UK and the PRC, for example. Both are major powers, but the latter has a growing lead over the former across multiple areas: its economic yield is substantially greater, while the People's Liberation Army – the Chinese armed forces – is becoming a formidable foe, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

But Britain has started to leverage its relationships – built up over many years – to compensate, even in the PRC's own backyard. With Australia and the US, the UK has formed AUKUS. Not only is Australia's navy being upskilled, but the defence-industrial and technological wherewithal of all three partners is being increased. Meanwhile, the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) has similar multiplying properties and demonstrates the sheer number of partners – straddling both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific – that Britain can draw on to make up for its smaller national powerbase.

Perceptions also matter. Unlike the PRC, which is a Leninist authoritarian state, the UK is a pioneer of liberal democracy and the rule of law. Seen as a reliable partner, Britain was swiftly invited into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a 'dialogue partner' after leaving the European Union (EU), and joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) – membership of which the PRC still seeks. Both of these enhance the UK's ability to shape its Indo-Pacific preferences.

Despite its sharp economic decline, Japan is another country that has leaned into its structural power. In his 2007 'Confluence of the Two Seas' speech, Shinzo Abe, the late prime minister of Japan, articulated the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a 'free and open' space that should stretch from the west of the Indian Ocean to the east of the Pacific.[7] The subscription of many countries to this vision, which Japan has continued to spearhead, gives Tokyo influence beyond its economic and military heft.

Structural power can only go so far though. 'Our power comes from the perception of our power', hissed Mikhail Gorbachev, then general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl*, as he informed the Politburo of his international counterparts' response to the meltdown.[8] Undoubtedly carrying a kernel of truth, his words also bore an implicit admission: the Soviet Union's position rested less on a durable national powerbase and more on previous success – structural power – that the disaster would only serve to undermine.

Regardless of the type of power, the global race to acquire it is accelerating. New forces are rising, many with interests hostile to those of Britain. As Russia has shown, states will continue to use muscle if they believe it pays – and the UK's allies and partners may not be excluded. There is no room for complacency. The last few years have delivered a harsh reminder that those who find the competition for power distasteful will not be spared. They will simply be displaced by belligerents.

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- **James Rogers** is Co-founder (Research) at the Council on Geostrategy. Prior to its establishment, he held a range of positions at think tanks, including at the Baltic Defence College in Estonia and the European Union Institute for Security Studies in France. He is also a Visiting Fellow at the Durham Institute of Research, Development, and Invention (DIRDI).

- **Patrick Triglavcanin** is an International Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy and Research Assistant at the Defence and Strategic Institute at the University of Western Australia. He holds a BA in Law and Society from the University of Western Australia and an MA in International Relations and National Security Studies from Curtin University.

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION


Belarus

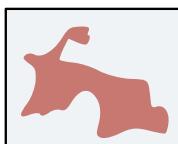

India


Iran


Kazakhstan


Kyrgyzstan


Pakistan


Tajikistan


Uzbekistan

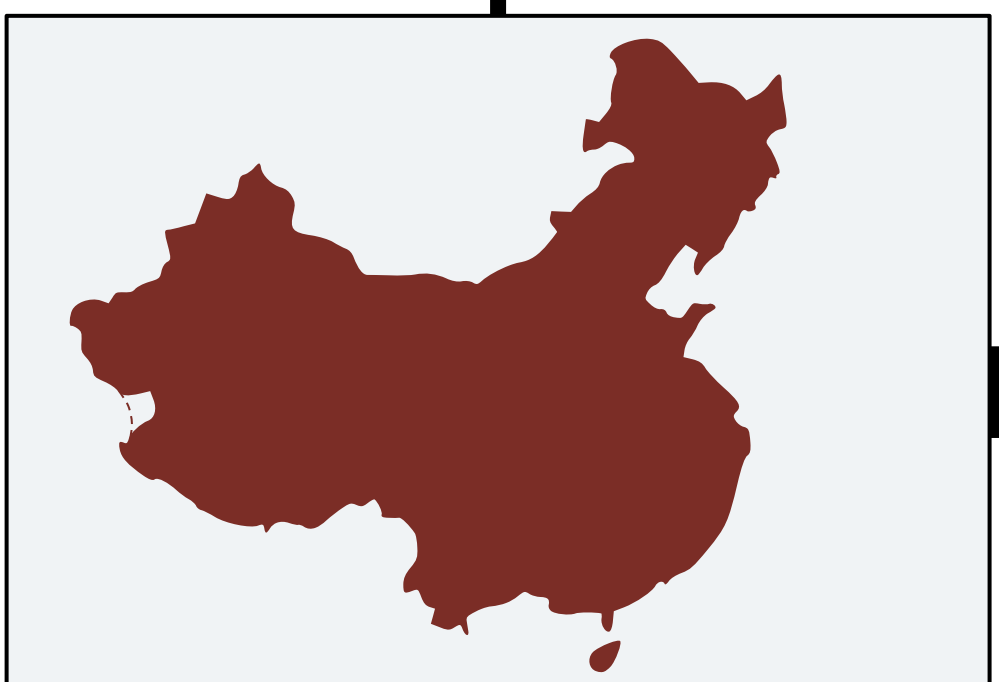
OBSERVERS


Afghanistan


Mongolia

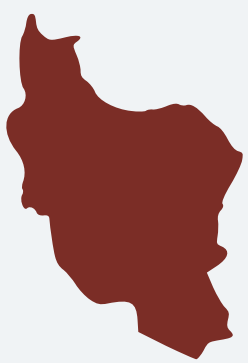
DIALOGUE PARTNERS

- Armenia
- Azerbaijan
- Bahrain
- Cambodia
- Egypt
- Kuwait
- Maldives
- Myanmar
- Nepal
- Qatar
- Saudi Arabia
- Sri Lanka
- Türkiye
- United Arab Emirates



STRATEGIC SUPPORT

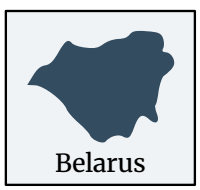
DRONES



TROOPS

COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANISATION


Armenia


Belarus


Kazakhstan


Kyrgyzstan


Tajikistan

6. Rivals: The CRINK

BY GRACE THEODOULOU AND DR VICTORIA VDOVYCHENKO

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, followed by significant military and economic strain, created strong incentives for the Kremlin to seek new strategic partnerships, catalysing the formation of the loose 'CRINK' coalition. Although often described as an 'axis', it is more accurately characterised as a network of deepening bilateral relationships between the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia, Iran, and North Korea – states that have become critical to sustaining the Russian war effort.

While not a formal alliance, these countries have formed closer ties with each other, starting with Russia and the PRC announcing a 'no-limits partnership' just three weeks before the former launched its invasion of Ukraine.[1] Collectively, they appear to be forming a loose grouping, bound less by shared ideological values than by convergent strategic interests.

As a series of predominantly bilateral relationships concentrated in the fields of security and defence, these ties can be characterised as pragmatic, enhancing collective interests of the states involved to challenge the prevailing international order while simultaneously increasing their resilience against free and open nations' efforts to constrain or deter their activities. Russia has functioned as a catalyst for this evolving network, becoming increasingly dependent on its partners to advance its strategic objectives and operational requirements.

Beijing's support for the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates how the internationalisation of its global initiatives through forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is detrimental to the free and open international order. The PRC's Foreign Ministry stated in 2024 that bilateral relations with Russia are at 'their best in history', while in July 2025, the Chinese Foreign Minister told the European Union (EU) High Representative that it was not in the PRC's interest for Russia to lose the conflict in Ukraine.[2] This is a major reason why Beijing has been labelled a 'decisive enabler' in Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Not only is it supplying the Russian war machine with critical components, but total bilateral trade has grown since the invasion began – in 2024, total trade was more than double that of 2020.

While Russia and the PRC are the two major powers of the CRINK arrangement, it extends beyond separate instances of bilateral cooperation. In March 2025, for example, Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing conducted the fifth round of the annual 'Security Belt 2025' joint naval exercises off the Iranian coast.

Iran has maintained a long-standing alliance with Russia, characterised by strategic coordination with non-state militant actors across the Middle East. This partnership deepened significantly in 2022, when Tehran began supplying the Kremlin with artillery shells, tank ammunition, and Shahed drones, which have been employed in near-daily attacks on Ukrainian civilian and critical infrastructure. Iran's provision of Uncrewed Aerial Systems (UAS) to Russia represents a central indicator of their rapidly intensifying military partnership.

Tehran is estimated to have supplied more than 3,000 drones via the Caspian Sea – an internal transit route effectively controlled by both states. Deliveries have included the Shahed-131/136 and Mohajer-6 systems, which Russia has employed extensively to target Ukraine, frequently resulting in civilian casualties.[3] More recently, this cooperation has escalated further to encompass the transfer of increasingly lethal ballistic missile systems, underscoring the evolving military dimension of the relationship.

Russian-Iranian arms transfers reportedly include air defence systems supplied by Ukraine's allies, seized by Russia and now being offered to Iran for use and reverse engineering. Moreover, both countries have been observed studying Israeli attacks on Russian-supplied S-300 air defence systems, seeking lessons that might enhance their own integrated air defence architecture. This alliance is primarily driven by a convergent strategic interest: undermining Israeli regional power – as well as that of its American ally – through asymmetric threats and proliferating advanced weaponry.

The 2024 Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and North Korea includes a mutual defence clause, obligating each party to assist the other in the event of an external attack. As of March 2025, an estimated 11,000 North Korean personnel had been deployed in support of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with approximately 5,000 casualties reported, including around 1,600 fatalities.[4] With

economic engagement constrained by sanctions, North Korea appears to view the deployment of personnel to Russia as a rare source of foreign currency, potentially generating up to US$260 million (£194 million) annually if 10,000 troops were maintained in-theatre.[5]

Beyond revenue, the deployment also offers Pyongyang's forces exposure to contemporary combat environments, ranging from drone warfare to electronic operations – experience that would otherwise be unattainable domestically. As Russia becomes increasingly reliant on Chinese support, sustaining North Korea – both materially and diplomatically – offers it a measure of leverage vis-à-vis Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Pyongyang has already supplied the Kremlin with at least 20,000 shipping containers containing an estimated 8 million artillery rounds, primarily 122 millimetre and 152 millimetre shells.[6]

North Korean ammunition has constituted approximately 50%-60% of Russia's artillery expenditure in Ukraine, and nearly one third of all Russian ballistic missile launchers.[7] In turn, Pyongyang is receiving advanced weaponry, including Artificial Intelligence (AI)-guided attack drones, tanks equipped with enhanced Electronic Warfare (EW) systems, a new naval destroyer armed with supersonic cruise missiles, and an updated air defence system. Russia is also assisting in the modernisation of North Korea's outdated Soviet-era arsenal.

Russia's deterrence strategy is rooted in its strategic culture, which emphasises a holistic and integrated approach to the use of force. Within Russian military thought, no clear distinction exists between conventional and non-conventional means of deterrence or coercion. They are both considered integral components of a single continuum of strategic engagement.

In this context, the Russian military appears to conceptualise its aggression against Ukraine as a testing ground for the doctrine of 'strategic gestures' – a concept within its strategic lexicon referring to the employment or demonstration of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities to deter, compel, or influence an adversary. Therefore, activating its existing partnerships, as well as scaling them up, comes with a pragmatic framework to challenge the free and open international order, ideologically at the heart of the CRINK grouping. In practice, the alignment between the CRINK nations has supported their respective military-industrial complexes, replacing critical dependencies on dual-use and military components manufactured in their adversary countries.

As the infographic illustrates, while the CRINK states have drawn together, they have also leveraged an alternative series of strategic relationships to multiply their influence further. Chief among these are the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Both are often positioned as counterweights to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The two organisations have an uneasy relationship, not least as the PRC and the SCO have grown in relative importance in relation to Russia and the CSTO. The SCO's geographical focus is Central Asia – historically Russia's domain of influence, where the majority of members are still aligned with the Kremlin – but the PRC is the SCO's most influential member, and its driving force.

Although the CRINK grouping and the SCO and CSTO are not institutionally connected, their trajectories have become increasingly intertwined. This convergence arises from Russia's deepening strategic dependencies, overlapping threat perceptions with other authoritarian actors, and the gradual erosion of CSTO cohesion. CSTO members are progressively becoming less reliant on the Kremlin's support, while Russia is becoming increasingly dependent on CRINK partners for military and technological assistance. Consequently, the CRINK's strategic priorities now exert indirect but significant influence on CSTO dynamics.

Despite profound ideological, societal, and economic divergences, the CRINK states have forged a pragmatic alignment, grounded not in shared values but in shared antagonism towards the prevailing international order. Their cooperation is thus less a partnership of conviction than a marriage of convenience, sustained by converging interests in countering free and open nations.

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Biographies

- **Grace Theodoulou** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy, where she was previously a Policy Fellow for the China Observatory. Before this, she worked at the Taipei Representative Office in the UK in the Economic Division, carrying out policy and trade analysis in Mandarin and English. She has given evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House of Commons.

- **Dr Victoria Vdovychenko** is Joint Programme Leader of the Future of Ukraine Project at the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge. Previously, she was Programme Director for Security Studies at the Centre for Defence Strategies, Senior Associate Expert at Ukrainian Prism, and Associate Professor at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University.

CRINK states
CRINK associates
Target nations
Crunch zones
CRINK overseas military base

Rail hub (Belt and Road Initiative)
Port (Belt and Road Initiative)

Greenland (Den.)
Arctic Ocean
Arctic Route
Norway
Finland
Russia
United Kingdom
Siberian Route
GREATER EURASIAN PARTNERSHIP
Japan
North Korea
Mongolia
France
Poland
North-South Corridor
Steppe Route
Spain
Kazakhstan
Italy
Khorasan Route
BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE
Türkiye
Turkmenistan
People's Republic of China
Algeria
Afghanistan
Libya
Iran
Egypt
Saudi Arabia
India
Myanmar
Philippines
Niger
Sudan
Chad
Cambodia
Nigeria
Gulf Route
Red Sea Route
Central African Republic
South Sudan
Ethiopia
Somalia
Indonesia
Gabon
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Kenya
Swahili Route
Tanzania
Indian Ocean
Angola
Zambia
Mozambique
Namibia
Zimbabwe
Botswana
Madagascar
South Africa
Australia

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Base map: WorldMapGenerator (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

KEY CRUNCH ZONES IN THE LATE 2020s

#	REGION	THREAT
1	Wider North	Russian territorial claims and militarisation
2	Baltic Sea	Russia's probing of allied defences
3	Black Sea	Russian imperialism in Ukraine and Moldova
4	The Caucasus	Russia's illegitimate presence in Georgia
5	The Levant	Iranian proxies and destabilisation
6	The Sahel	Russian mercenaries and destabilisation
7	Arabian Peninsula	Iran's support for the Houthis
8	Himalayas	Chinese encroachment on Bhutan
9	South China Sea	Chinese territorial claims and militarisation
10	Taiwan	Chinese blockade or invasion
11	East China Sea	Chinese pressure on the Senkaku Islands
12	Korean Peninsula	North Korean military action

7. Crunch zones

BY DR HILLARY BRIFFA AND WILLIAM FREER

A geopolitical 'crunch zone' is a part of the world that holds strategic significance, and commonly sits between the fault lines of the major powers. As a result, crunch zones often feature recurring conflicts, are generally characterised by political instability, and tend to draw in the political, military, and economic interests of the major powers.

The ability to exert influence over these spaces can allow powerful countries to dominate the surrounding areas and secure their interests. Sometimes, this is focused on geostrategic gain, such as securing maritime chokepoints, building strategic depth, or enabling power projection through military presence abroad. Other times, it is focused on securing crucial resources, such as oil or critical minerals. Often, a combination of both drives competition in crunch zones.

As the map shows, crunch zones are proliferating because rising powers have invested in the tools needed to reshape their neighbourhoods and challenge their rivals.[1] In a globalised world, the People's Republic of China's (PRC) overseas port and rail systems, Russia's militarised energy corridors, Iran's proxies and financial channels, and North Korea's missile programmes are giving each actor more leverage abroad than at any point since the Cold War. Meanwhile, political bandwidth and institutional strength in free and open countries have been strained by domestic upheaval, economic shocks, shifting alliances, and public disillusionment.

This gap enables revisionist states to act with fewer constraints, particularly in places marked by governance failure or poor connectivity. As with the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership, infrastructure that should build cooperation risks deepening vulnerability and dependency. Cuts to aid and the erosion of crisis diplomacy are further magnifying escalation risks, while the climate emergency and demographic strain are leaving fragile governments increasingly open to coercion. Proliferation is therefore a product of power and permissiveness converging simultaneously.

Europe includes four active crunch zones linked to Russian expansionism. In the Wider North, Russia is pursuing Arctic claims and expanding its military installations along the Northern Sea Route, projecting control over routes emerging from melting ice. In the Baltic Sea, Russian vessels and aircraft continue to probe North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) defences, testing responses to the Kremlin's irredentist claims without triggering open conflict.[2] In the Black Sea, Russia's assault on Ukraine has reshaped maritime access, disrupted grain exports, exposed Moldova to direct pressure, and undermined regional food security. In the Caucasus, Russian forces continue to occupy parts of Georgia illegally, and although Armenia and Azerbaijan have endorsed a framework for future relations in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, questions persist over long-term security guarantees and external alignment.

Importantly, these zones are not independent. Naval blockades in the Black Sea shape food markets in North Africa; tensions in the Baltic reshape NATO force posture; and the Arctic has become a staging ground for dual-use energy and submarine platforms.

Together, these European zones show how the Kremlin uses information manipulation and economic coercion, reinforced by intermittent military activity and diplomatic obstruction – including its United Nations (UN) veto power – to erode regional cohesion and stretch Europe's capacity for coordinated response.

In the Middle East, the primary driver of instability is Iran.[3] Additionally, despite the loss of its ally in Syria and the strain that its full-scale invasion of Ukraine has placed on its military, Russia also continues to attempt to influence the region in line with its interests.

Tehran's efforts to create a corridor of clients from the Zagros Mountains to the Mediterranean Sea – through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon – sees it support numerous proxy groups in these countries. Bashar al-Assad, the former Syrian dictator, only remained in power as long as he did due to Russian and Iranian cooperation supporting his regime. While Assad is now deposed, Syria remains an open question – neither the Kremlin nor Tehran will give up on their ambitions in the Levant.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Iran has sought – both through direct military capabilities and through support of

proxies – to possess the power to close two of the world's most important maritime chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandeb. Through massed (albeit relatively crude) missile power and unconventional naval forces, Tehran has demonstrated both the capacity and desire to conduct such activity.

The economic and strategic impact of closing both straits in a global crisis would damage the ability of free and open countries to transition forces between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres, and would undermine the strength of their economies, thereby weakening their ability to generate public support and maintain military power. The ease with which the Houthis were able to force trade flows to redirect around Africa should be ringing alarm bells within adherents to the free and open international order.

Africa, home to one fifth of the world's population and much of its critical resources (such as cobalt, chromium, and uranium) is also witnessing an intensification of geopolitical competition.[4] Russian mercenaries and Chinese influence building projects seek to secure access to these markets and squeeze out competition.

The Indo-Pacific hosts some of the most visible and potentially volatile crunch zones, driven by the PRC's unprecedented military buildup and North Korea's reckless actions. In the Himalayas, Chinese infrastructure projects have brought investment to remote regions, but have also enabled incremental encroachment into Bhutan and intensified border tensions with India. In the South China Sea, development and construction have likewise delivered logistical capacity and trade infrastructure, yet Beijing's militarisation of reefs and atolls has created de facto control over strategic waters, threatening the sovereignty of Vietnam, the Philippines, and other coastal states while testing freedom of navigation. Taiwan remains the most acute flashpoint, with the PRC rehearsing blockade and invasion scenarios designed to force unification.[5]

In the East China Sea, similar pressure is applied to the Senkaku Islands, placing Japan and the American-Japanese alliance on the frontline of deterrence. The Korean Peninsula continues to be destabilised by North Korea's nuclear arsenal and missile tests, raising the spectre of miscalculation.

These zones expose growing tensions over supply chain resilience, and maritime law and legitimacy – especially given neither the PRC nor the United States (US) has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) – showing how control of infrastructure and sea lanes is shaping both economic security and regional power alignment.

It is no coincidence that the world's main geopolitical crunch zones form a ring emanating outwards from the CRINK countries. Their desire to undermine, and if possible rewrite, the existing free and open order pose the most serious geopolitical challenge that Britain and its allies and partners have faced for decades. The proliferation of crunch zone conflicts will lead to further instability, which will pose greater strain on the economic, military, and societal potential of free and open countries.

Looking ahead, climate disruption, resource competition, stressed governance institutions, and intensifying geopolitical rivalry all increase the risk of escalation, even when no actor seeks conflict. South America has largely avoided such dynamics to date; however, outside powers are already expanding influence over critical minerals and key energy corridors. The region may become a later entrant into a global competition where strategic pressure grows faster than governance can contain it. As competition in the crunch zones intensifies, containing the ambitions of the CRINK countries will be key to preventing a concentration of power across critical theatres. The United Kingdom (UK) should work with its partners to reinforce regional resilience and uphold international norms, or risk influence in critical theatres shifting to actors less constrained by transparency or restraint.

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- **Dr Hillary Briffa** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy and Senior Lecturer in National Security Studies and Assistant Director of the Centre for Defence Studies in the Department of War Studies, King's College London. She is on the editorial board of the *Small States and Territories Journal*, and regularly consults on foreign policy and defence issues.

- **William Freer** is Research Fellow in National Security at the Council on Geostrategy, where he co-leads the Strategic Defence Unit. He is also an Associate Fellow at the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre. He holds a BA in War Studies from King's College London, and worked as a consultant prior to joining the Council on Geostrategy.

NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION

Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, United States

Special relationship

REFRESHED BILATERALS

Japan, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Ukraine

Global Combat Air Programme

Enhanced partnership

AUKUS

Australia, United States

UNITED KINGDOM
and Crown Dependencies

FIVE POWER DEFENCE ARRANGEMENTS

Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore

FIVE EYES

Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United States

JOINT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden

Council on Geostrategy

8. Allies and partners

BY DR WILLIAM D. JAMES AND PETER WATKINS CB CBE

Alliances and partnerships sit at the heart of British grand strategy. Since the mid-1960s, the United Kingdom's (UK) defence planners have assumed that it would not fight major wars alone.[1] Successive governments have followed this principle almost without exception.

Britain helped build the Euro-Atlantic system after the Second World War. As a driving force behind the 1948 Brussels Treaty and the 1949 Washington Treaty, it shaped both the Western European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In the following decade, it played an instrumental role in the founding of analogous – but ultimately weaker – collective defence pacts in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, which lasted until the late 1970s. In the intelligence sphere, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand joined an expanded UK-United States (US) agreement, functioning as the 'Five Eyes' from the mid-1950s.

In parallel, Britain deepened its defence cooperation with select allies on a bilateral and minilateral basis. With America, the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement laid the basis for enduring nuclear cooperation. Defence collaboration with France in the 1960s and 1970s yielded helicopters and the Jaguar combat aircraft. Minilaterally, the UK worked with Germany and Italy to co-develop the Tornado combat aircraft from the late 1960s, later expanding the consortium in the mid-1980s to include Spain for the Eurofighter Typhoon.

Beyond the Euro-Atlantic, Britain forged the Five Power Defence Arrangements in 1971 with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore for crisis consultation and exercises in Southeast Asia. It also developed bilateral defence links with the Gulf states, which have continued to deepen over the following decades.

This pattern – anchoring NATO at the 'heart' of the UK's defence policy, complemented by the Five Eyes and select bilateral or minilateral regional partnerships – persisted throughout the Cold War and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Specific milestones included the 1998 St. Malo Declaration and the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties with France, and British-French cooperation extended to Germany through the European Three (E3) format. Originally designed to coalesce a European position in the Iranian nuclear negotiations, the E3's remit gradually expanded across a range of issues from Gaza to the South China Sea.

As great power competition has returned to Europe, signalled most sharply by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, His Majesty's (HM) Government moved quickly to build a new web of bilateral and minilateral ties across the Euro-Atlantic. For example, it signed a defence memorandum with the Republic of Ireland in 2015, a defence and security cooperation treaty with Poland in 2017, and extended its arm to Ukraine through Operation ORBITAL in 2015 – a training mission that laid the groundwork for the British-led (and UK-based) multinational military training effort following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. That same year, Britain offered security guarantees to Finland and Sweden, providing cover until their accessions to NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively. Ties with Ukraine have since been further strengthened by the Agreement on Security Cooperation in 2024 and the 100-Year Partnership Agreement in January 2025.

Minilaterally, the UK launched the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) in September 2014 with several northern European allies. The JEF is increasingly focused on the Nordic-Baltic area, activating Operation NORDIC WARDEN in January 2025 to help protect undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea and agreeing an 'enhanced partnership' with Kyiv in November 2025. Multilaterally, Britain became a framework nation for NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Estonia in 2017.

In parallel, the UK has been reinforcing its long-standing transatlantic ties. It renewed its core nuclear partnership with the US in November 2024, extending the Mutual Defence Agreement indefinitely – despite mounting speculation about Washington's commitment to European security.

Britain is also deepening cooperation with its European allies. The British-German Trinity House Agreement of October 2024 built on their 2018 Joint Vision Statement to strengthen defence – and especially defence-industrial – cooperation. A Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed with Romania in November 2024, and talks are underway on a new treaty with Poland. In the Northwood Declaration of July 2025, the UK and

France pledged to 'deepen their nuclear cooperation' and affirmed that 'there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations'.[2] Finally, historic defence ties with Norway have been rebooted by Oslo's decision in August 2025 to acquire five Type 26 class frigates, which will be built in Britain.

Meanwhile, the UK is expanding its bilateral and minilateral partnerships beyond the Euro-Atlantic. The Five Eyes now cooperate in the cyber and space domains, launching the Defence Cyber Contact Group in 2011 and the Combined Space Operations (CSpO) Initiative in 2014. The latter now includes additional Euro-Atlantic partners – France, Germany, Italy, and Norway – and Japan in the Indo-Pacific.

Since 2010, Britain has deepened its defence relationship with Australia and forged a new partnership with Japan after Shinzo Abe, then prime minister of Japan, made a historic visit to London in 2014. Both developments carried a strong defence capability dimension: Australia selected the Type 26 class frigate design in 2018, while British-Japanese co-development of new defence technologies began after 2014. These ventures foreshadowed two major minilateral capability partnerships.

The UK, US, and Australia unveiled the AUKUS defence pact in September 2021, marking a step-change in Britain's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS rests upon two pillars. The first involves the provision of nuclear submarine technology to Australia, initially through the sale of American Virginia class boats, and later through cooperation with the UK on a new generation of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). The second expands collaboration across emerging and sensitive technologies, including quantum computing and hypersonic missiles. Additionally, in 2024 and 2025 respectively, Britain and Australia signed a Defence and Security Cooperation Agreement and the Geelong Treaty. Both underpin AUKUS, and help to insulate the bilateral partnership from fluctuations in US foreign policy.

Roughly in parallel, the UK, Italy, and Japan are jointly developing a sixth-generation combat aircraft under the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP). London and Tokyo also elevated their bilateral partnership in 2023 through the Hiroshima Accord. Together, GCAP and the wider Britain-Japan relationship illustrate how core American allies are forging cross-regional links that reinforce the principles of the prevailing international order, even as Washington seemingly tires from the strain of global leadership. When launching GCAP, the three partner nations emphasised their aim to bolster collective deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and Europe while maintaining future interoperability with the US.

In 2025, the Strategic Defence Review defined the UK's alliance strategy as 'NATO first' but not 'NATO only'.[3] This formulation reflects long-standing reflexes in British grand strategy. Even in the immediate post-Brexit era – when Boris Johnson, then prime minister, trumpeted the slogan of 'Global Britain' – successive Conservative governments reaffirmed the UK was 'unconditionally committed' to European security.[4]

Meanwhile, since the mid-1960s, Britain has carefully balanced its equities – particularly in defence capabilities – within NATO between America and European partners, cooperating more closely with the former on nuclear, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), space, and cyber capabilities, and with the latter on air and land capabilities. Courtesy of its established relationships and new initiatives, the UK occupies a pivotal position in a resilient alliance network, conferring a strategic edge over its rivals.

Endnotes

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- **Dr William D. James** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy, a Visiting Fellow at the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre, and Assistant Professor of Strategic Studies at NTU Singapore. He is the author of *British Grand Strategy in the Age of American Hegemony* (2024) and the co-editor of *Transatlantic Storms in Anglo-American Relations: How the Alliance Weathers Crises* (2026).

- **Peter Watkins CB CBE** is an Honorary Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy and a Visiting Professor at King's College London. He was Director General for Strategy and International (2017-2018) and Security Policy (2014-2017) at the Ministry of Defence, and previously served as Director General of the UK Defence Academy and Director of Operational Policy (among other senior roles).

Steaming times assume an average speed of 12 knots

NAVAL BASES of the United Kingdom

HMS Neptune
Faslane

HMS Gannet
Prestwick

HMS Heron
Yeovilton

HMS Drake
Plymouth

HMS Nelson
Portsmouth

HMS Seahawk
Culdrose

Arctic Ocean

Pacific Ocean

North Atlantic

South Atlantic

Indian Ocean

Bering Strait

Russia

Japan

North Korea

South Korea

Taiwan Strait

Taiwan

South China Sea

People's Republic of China

Malaysia

Brunei

Indonesia

Singapore

Sembawang

Australia

Fleet Base West (2027)

Svalbard (Nor.)

Greenland (Den.)

Camp Viking

2 days

Keflavík

Northern Gap

5 days

United Kingdom

Tapa

Šiauliai

Orzysz

Paderborn

Constanta

Black Sea

Bosphorus

Pokhara

Kathmandu

Bay of Bengal

Iran

Strait of Hormuz

India

Al Udeid

Juffair

Duqm

Sovereign Bases

Gibraltar

Strait of Gibraltar

4 days

7 days

10 days

7 days

7 days

10 days

Suez Canal

Egypt

Algeria

Sudan

Bab-el-Mandeb

Somalia

Kenya

Nyati

British Indian Ocean Territory

Strait of Malacca

United States

Canada

Mexico

Belize City

Nicaragua

12-15 days

Panama Canal

Venezuela

Peru

Guyana

Chile

Brazil

Argentina

Strait of Magellan

Sierra Leone

Nigeria

Ascension

Gulf of Guinea

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Angola

Namibia

South Africa

12 days

Falkland Islands

9 days

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE
Maximum range of a Trident II D5 missile fired from a Vanguard class submarine in the North Atlantic.

British allies (NATO, AUKUS, FPDA)

Key British partners

CRINK states

CRINK associates

British military facility

British military presence

Council on Geostrategy

9. Maritime reach

BY PROF. KEVIN ROWLANDS AND VIKTORIJA STARYCH-SAMUOLIENĖ

In the early 15th century, Adm. Zheng He led a vast Chinese fleet around the area now known as the Indo-Pacific. His ships, larger than any found in Europe at the time, reached from Southeast Asia to East Africa. True, Zheng used force and extracted tribute, but the purpose of his voyages was not colonisation. Rather, it was strategic positioning – securing maritime communication lines, promoting and protecting trade, establishing diplomatic relations, and showcasing the Ming dynasty's power and prestige.

Unfortunately for the Chinese, it did not last. After sallying forth for just a few decades, Ming China retreated from the sea. This maritime contraction fuelled a growing geopolitical insularity that subsequently became a vulnerability as Britons and Europeans perfected maritime globalisation. Only in the 21st century, approximately 600 years later, has the People's Republic of China (PRC) started to regain its maritime position.[1]

The historical lesson is clear: if major continental powers suffer from ignoring their maritime horizons, archipelagic countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) must depend on the sea for national survival. Fortunately, as England emerged as a centralised kingdom in the 16th century, Britons, unlike their Chinese counterparts, began to see seapower as foundational to national success. At first, they furnished a navy to defend themselves; then, with their shores secured, they pushed outwards to develop defence in depth.

Over time, the Royal Navy was able to overcome the tyranny of distance using larger and more durable warships and a network of overseas bases, extending British influence across the Euro-Atlantic, and as far as Australasia. This gave the UK unparalleled power: the Prime Meridian of the world was established in Greenwich, the international order was shaped from London, and wealth, goods, people, and ideas flowed between the British Isles and the wider world. This transformed the country into a genuine entrepôt, before helping to kickstart the Industrial Revolution.

Today's Royal Navy may be smaller than in previous centuries, but it is still a technologically advanced force, centred around four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and seven nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs); two large aircraft carriers equipped with F-35B Lightning II Joint Combat Aircraft; six Type 45 class destroyers; and a number of frigates and Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) – all of which can be assembled into a strike group whenever His Majesty's (HM) Government deems necessary.[2] This is a unique capability that few others can replicate.

The 'New Hybrid Navy' concept promises to compound the effectiveness of this force.[3] New long-range weapons, now in the process of development, alongside the introduction of uncrewed systems – such as a hybrid carrier air wing, underwater drones, and large uncrewed surface vessels – will act as force multipliers for the Royal Navy's crewed platforms, both existing and future. When introduced, this hybrid fleet will allow the UK to enhance its interests more effectively than it has in years.

As the map illustrates, from its bases in the British Isles and globally, the Royal Navy can still reach across the length and breadth of the Euro-Atlantic, into the Indo-Pacific, and to the fringes of the polar regions – both north and south. These are the most likely destinations to which the Royal Navy would need to steam to promote and defend the UK's security and economic interests, keep maritime communication lines open, strengthen international alliances and partnerships, and deter adversaries.

In an era of instantaneous communications, the annotated steaming times on the map – three weeks to the South Atlantic or the Middle East and over a month to Australia – might sound very slow. But that is to miss the point, and not only because these times reflect the immutable reality of strategic geography.

Maritime reach is about presence as much as arrival. The time it takes to steam to a location also represents the time required for reinforcement, or 'roulement', of British maritime forces already in that theatre, either through permanent stationing or through pre-positioning in periods of growing tension. Maritime reach in this traditional sense is instinctively familiar to every sailor and marine in the Royal Navy.

Further, a strike group leaving the UK can be in the South

Atlantic or the Indian Ocean in a couple of weeks. This can be done effectively in numerous ways: alone as a self-contained entity or in concert with like-minded allies and partners; with or without access, or with basing and overflight permissions. As it steams to its destination, it exerts growing influence, in peace or in war, which British diplomats can use to project the nation's agenda. The deployments of the Royal Navy's carrier strike groups in 2021 and 2025 provide ample demonstration.[4]

Underpinning this conventional reach is the nuclear deterrent. As the dashed circle on the map indicates, Trident II D5 missiles fired from a Vanguard class SSBN in the North Atlantic can strike targets as far away as the Western Pacific in approximately 30 minutes. This reach, conventional and nuclear, guarantees the UK's ability to deter threats to its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies in the North Atlantic and work with its AUKUS partners in the Indo-Pacific, as well as to support and protect its overseas territories.

Looking deeper, contemporary naval reach also includes logistic support and continuous preparation for the operating environment. It incorporates continuous analysis and evaluation, and familiarisation with the oceanographic and meteorological conditions, surveying the 'ground' or watching how friends and foes alike adapt and go about their business in different parts of the world.

Yet, in the 21st century, maritime reach is not simply about grey hulls and firepower. It requires an ability to work hand-in-hand with local and multinational businesses to ensure that Britain's critical energy infrastructure is protected, emails are sent and calls are made, and online shopping orders are fulfilled. Instantaneous communications, undersea cables, and offshore power are now as important as shipping lanes and naval bases.[5]

If maritime reach is thought about in this way, it becomes clear that technology giants, utility providers, and myriad other companies are also maritime actors. Their businesses, and wider society more generally, depend upon the ability to use the sea for lawful purposes. By understanding the complexities of this operating environment and by working with new partners in public-private partnerships, the UK can continue to promote and defend security and prosperity.

For Britain, the maritime domain has always been central to national security and economic growth, and the Royal Navy's mission to guard it remains the same. However, the pace of change and the magnitude of geostrategic challenges requires a transformation of approach in how it is done. The connecting of military, political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural instruments of geostrategic effort on, over, under, and from the sea is evolving. The need for the navy and private enterprise to understand one another is central to maritime reach. This is a different task, but a crucial one. It will be central to the realisation of the New Hybrid Navy, in which everyone should play a role.

Endnotes

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- **Prof. Kevin Rowlands** is Editor of the *RUSI Journal*, Visiting Professor at King's College London, and a Professor-in-Practice at the University of Lancaster. Previously, he was Head of the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre. He served in the Royal Navy for 30 years, of which 20 were spent at sea, and reached the rank of Captain.

- **Viktorija Starych-Samuolienė** is Co-founder (Strategy) at the Council on Geostrategy, where she is responsible for the organisation's strategy and growth, as well as events such as the Royal Navy's International Sea Power Conference. She is also a Fellow of the Durham Institute of Research, Development, and Invention (DIRDI).

'Atlantic Bastion'

Atlantic Ocean

United Kingdom

Faslane

Plymouth

Portsmouth

Gibraltar

Greenland (Den.)

Canada

Norfolk

Mayport

United States

Panama Canal

Missile threat to the British Isles: Russia's Northern Fleet can fire as many as 800 cruise missiles.

JOINT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

Nagurskoye

Severomorsk

Arctic Ocean

RUSSIAN BASTION

Kitsap

San Diego

Russia's ongoing efforts to annex Ukraine have displaced millions and challenged the foundations of the Euro-Atlantic order.

Sevastopol (Rus.)

Eastern perimeter

Western barrier

Pacific Ocean

Russia

Sovereign Bases

Tartus (Rus.)

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky

Suez Canal

Pearl Harbour

Iran

Port Sudan (Rus.)

Bandar Abbas

Juffair (UK)

Djibouti (PRC)

Duqm (UK)

Vladivostok

Japan

Yokosuka (US)

People's Republic of China

Qingdao

Sasebo (US)

India

Ningbo

Zhanjiang

Strategic support

Yulin

Woody Island

Apra Harbour

Diego Garcia

Ream (PRC)

Chinese expansion in the East and South China seas has led to numerous clashes with Philippine and Vietnamese warships and coast guard cutters.

Sembawang (UK)

Pacific Ocean

Indian Ocean

Strategic support

FIVE POWER DEFENCE ARRANGEMENTS

Submarine patrols

New Zealand

Australia

Fleet Base West

Fleet Base East

AUKUS nations

NATO and key British partners

CRINK states

CRINK associates

AUKUS nations' key military facilities

Key CRINK military facilities

10. The strategy of security

BY PROF. JOHN BEW CMG AND DR ANDREW EHRHARDT

The pursuit of some sort of world order – something more than a regional order – has been an organising goal of the United Kingdom's (UK) foreign policy for over a century. This venture, to construct a system that prevents anarchy and war, and allows for flows of trade and commerce, was first born of strategic anxiety about the loose and diffuse nature of the British Empire and its ability to compete against multiple adversaries in different domains.

With some justification, the UK's rivals smelled hypocrisy and self-interest in its appeals to an international status quo that suited the British Empire. But, even if there was an element of deceit and self-delusion, the UK's efforts to imagine, tend to, and defend an international system of law and arbitration also had a genuinely idealistic impulse at its core. Many of the champions of internationalism sought a framework in which imperialism would melt away and the self-determination of nations would triumph.

Some of those efforts to build the foundations of an international system over the past century can be considered a great success, certainly when combined with American power. Others failed to achieve their goals, falling apart under duress or encouraging the myth that other nations were willing to play by the same rules. The successes were based on a recognition that any international order must be founded on a physical dimension and grounded in geopolitical realities. The failures followed times when the abstract ideal was not aligned with a full understanding of the geopolitical reality – and the exercise of power to back it up.

'Idealists are the salt of the earth', wrote Halford Mackinder, British geographer and strategist, in 1919, because 'without them to move us, society would soon stagnate and civilisation fade.'[1] But idealists were wrong to think they had triumphed over nature or the physical basis on which power depends, he warned at the moment of enthusiasm for Woodrow Wilson's ideas after the First World War.

After the Second World War, those charged with the building of a new international order were mindful of those lessons. 'We have had enough of the experience of the League of Nations to be quite clear that, whilst backing this essentially idealistic organisation, something more practical is required', said Field Marshal The Viscount Alanbrooke, then chief of the Imperial General Staff, in 1945. He was responding, with some scepticism, to supporters of the United Nations (UN), who hoped that it would bring an end to the contest for waterways and strategic chokepoints that had been such a prominent feature of the imperial great game.[2]

History tells us that the record of those strategists who took proper account of geography, the balance of power, and of history compares far more favourably to those who became caught up in enthusiasm by the technical work of multilateral design.

Encouragingly, it is becoming fashionable again to look at maps a little more, and not before time. In government, maps were more frequently used by senior decision-makers from the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, through to AUKUS and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, the heat map of British diplomacy also began to change, as successive prime ministers and foreign secretaries took to the road as the world of the 2020s started to take shape.

When it came to supporting Ukraine in the period preceding and immediately after the beginning of the Kremlin's invasion, the UK found more activist parts in the Nordic and Baltic nations, as well as Poland. Using the framework of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), Britain mobilised the sending of lethal aid and offered bridging security assurances to Finland and Sweden ahead of their accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). As the conflict began, the balance of force deployed to NATO's eastern flank was extensively re-examined, the Black Sea became a vital area of strategic contestation, and the importance of the Wider North as a potential area of future conflict rose up the political agenda. Now, it is the routes taken by Russia's sanctions-evading 'shadow fleet' and the threats to undersea cables by adversaries which take up a growing amount of time and effort to negate.

For the UK, the opportunity presented by AUKUS brought potentially immense benefits to the nuclear submarine enterprise. However, it also increased broader awareness of the

undersea domain and both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security environments. A similar logic – of depending on security and capability partnerships with like-minded nations in key geographies – also underlays the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) between Britain, Italy, and Japan.

A succession of hard security challenges in the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions underscored the importance of the maritime domain, with the UK engaging in successive airstrikes in response to Houthi attacks against civilian shipping in the Red Sea, as well as tending to Iranian threats to weaponise access to the Strait of Hormuz. It is likely that the second half of the 2020s will be a period in which there will be much more discussion about how events in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea have the potential to upend the very basis of Britain's economic security.

As shown in the map, a major theme of recent national security strategies has been to focus on the indivisibility of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres.[3] For the UK, the clear and consistent message has been that the Euro-Atlantic should be the first priority for resource and diplomatic attention. However, a growing number of countries in different theatres of the world share the view that the breakdown of collective security in different regions threatens them directly. Therefore, it is right and proper that the UK has a policy emphasising that "'NATO First" does not mean "NATO only"'.[4]

Achieving strategic depth with technologically advanced manufacturing economies that share a similar view of the international system is going to become an increasingly important part of the agenda in future years, building on existing work with Japan, South Korea, and others. The emphasis should therefore be on deeper cooperation, collective security, and new methods of deterrence against those adversaries and competitors – the so-called 'CRINK' nations – who are engaging in both strategic and opportunistic alignment of their own.

There is also potential opportunity here as Britain seeks new ways to adapt to changes in the global economy and to use technological and scientific developments to improve its prospects for growth. While multilateralism has remained a lodestar in British foreign policy, the emphasis is likely to shift to swift and ambitious bilateral and minilateral groupings on issues of primary strategic importance, such as critical minerals, undersea cables, and secure supply chains. One would therefore expect an increased focus of diplomatic attention and security cooperation with those countries that place a similar emphasis on preserving an open international order, and are geographically dispersed on the rim of the Eurasian landmass in and around open seas and critical waterways.

The source of many of the strategic challenges facing the UK today goes back to the fact that the physical dimension to Britain's international and security policy was given insufficient attention in the period since the end of the Cold War. Policymakers in the UK subscribed to a worldview that seemed to work for the country – the idea of a future world of offshoring of traditional industry, a shift to a service economy, and a comfort that just-in-time supply chains would always deliver the energy, trade, or critical minerals needed to sustain the British people or keep the economy afloat.

That period of history is over. The physical elements of national power and national security will become ever more important in the years to come. If the UK is to have any hope of carving out a place for itself in the new international order, then geopolitics, as well as the question of physical security and physical resources, must play a prominent part in national strategy.

Endnotes

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- **Prof. John Bew CMG** is Professor in History and Foreign Policy, and Director of the Centre for Statecraft and National Security at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. From 2019 to 2024, he served as Special Adviser on Foreign Policy to four prime ministers. He led on the production of the last three national security strategies for the UK, and was involved in shaping the most recent NATO Strategic Concept.

- **Dr Andrew Ehrhardt** is a Lecturer in Foreign Policy and Director of Research and Programmes at the Centre for Statecraft and National Security, King's College London. Previously, he held the role of Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Henry Kissinger Centre for Global Affairs.

RUSSIAN AGGRESSION
Since 2014, Russia has violated Ukraine's sovereignty through a series of invasions, which have killed in excess of 100,000 people and devastated Eastern Ukraine.

UKRAINE
Since January 2022, Britain has provided Ukraine with deep and extensive military, political, and economic support as Kyiv has faced Russia's renewed onslaught.

SUB-STRATEGIC NUCLEAR DETERRENCE
If deployed to Romanian, Estonian, or Norwegian air stations, the Royal Air Force's future nuclear-armed F-35A Lightning II Joint Combat Aircraft could hold at risk Russia's Black Sea Fleet and its facilities in Sevastopol, or the Northern Fleet and its complex of bases at Severomorsk.

AIR POLICING, BLACK SEA
Royal Air Force combat aircraft have deployed persistently to Constanta since 2018.

GLOBAL COMBAT AIR PROGRAMME
Alongside Japan, Britain is cooperating with Italy to deliver a sixth generation combat aircraft, one of the largest defence industrial collaborations of modern times.

TRINITY HOUSE AGREEMENT
In 2024, Britain signed the Trinity House Agreement with Germany to deepen strategic cooperation, particularly in relation to defending NATO from Russian aggression.

LANCASTER HOUSE TREATIES
Since 2010, Britain and France have pursued deepened military cooperation through the Lancaster House treaties, which were renewed in 2025.

NEW DEFENCE TREATY WITH POLAND
Since 2024, Britain has been negotiating a new security and defence treaty with Poland, to complement its treaties with France and Germany.

AIR POLICING, BALTIC STATES
Since 2014, British combat aircraft have deployed persistently to Amari and Šiauliai air stations.

ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE
Since 2017, British forces have been deployed to Estonia and Poland.

CAMP VIKING, NORWAY
The Royal Navy established a hub in 2023 in support of Arctic operations.

JOINT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

RUSSIAN BASTION

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Given its limited defence capabilities, Britain protects Irish airspace and monitors Russian activity in Irish waters.

AIR POLICING, ICELAND
Royal Air Force warplanes deployed to Keflavík Air Station in 2019 and 2024.

POWER PROJECTION
Since 1949, Canada and the United States have provided resources to maintain an orderly Europe. The growth of Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific, however, threatens to upend this approach, forcing Britain to provide renewed leadership.

ATLANTIC STRIKE
Through carrier enabled aviation, the Royal Navy can push north to challenge Russia's Northern Fleet.

ATLANTIC BASTION
The Strategic Defence Review 2025 began the establishment of a new defensive perimeter to monitor Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic.

STRATEGIC NUCLEAR DETERRENCE
The Royal Navy's Continuous At-Sea Deterrent (CASD) provides the nation and NATO with the capacity to wreck any enemy.

Sovereign Bases, Cyprus
Sevastopol
Outer security perimeter
Outer security perimeter
Kronstadt
Baltiysk
Gibraltar
Severomorsk
Rogachevo
Nagurskoye
Svalbard (Nor.)
United Kingdom
North Atlantic
Arctic Ocean
Greenland (Den.)

British allies (NATO) and partners
CRINK states and associates
Node of British sovereignty
Naval base
Air station
British military presence

11. Defending Europe

BY DR MARC DE VORE AND PAUL MASON

As the 26 submarines of Russia's Northern Fleet cruise into the Atlantic on an ever more frequent basis, policymakers have begun talking about a 'fourth battle' of the Atlantic. They fear that, in case of war, the Russian Navy might sever Europe's maritime communication lines with North America, just as German navies attempted during both world wars.

The implication is that British maritime strategy should prioritise defending these lines of communication above all else. However, there are ample reasons to believe that there was not even a third battle of the Atlantic. Archival documents suggest that during the Cold War, the Soviet Navy fulfilled many roles, but cutting transatlantic maritime communication lines was not one of them.

As the map shows, today – as then – Russia's primary strategic focus is to protect its ballistic missile nuclear-powered submarines (SSBNs), which provide capability for a second strike in any nuclear exchange, operate from their 'bastion' beneath the ice, and are supported by hardened infrastructure in and around Severomorsk.

In the event of war, the Soviet Union would also have conducted amphibious operations against its northern neighbours, while naval deployments in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean were designed to bolster the Kremlin's diplomacy in the developing world.

Today, Russia is repeating this methodological approach, using tailored naval assets to pursue distinct objectives in three different regions – and it is on these challenges that European maritime power should be focused.

Table 1 shows that European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) possess a substantial numerical advantage against the Russian Navy, even if the United States (US) was to contribute nothing to future scenarios, though questions surround European vessels' readiness for war.

Although European NATO is underweight in nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and lacks any cruiser class vessels, it has enough sea power to enact deterrence both by punishment and denial. As allies adopt 'dissimilar rearmament' strategies, countering surface combatants with autonomous vessels and stealth in the air, this collective naval advantage could be increased.

The maritime defence of Europe therefore revolves around two questions: how might Russia play its inferior hand at sea, and how can NATO employ its superior naval assets to deter aggression on land?

Russia's high-value naval assets are concentrated in the Wider North. With Finland and Sweden now members of NATO, Russian planners ought to worry more for the safety of these northern bases than at any time since the 1980s.

As usual, however, when Russian leaders feel concerned about their security, they develop plans to attack neighbours. In this regard, Russian policymakers display an unhealthy interest in the Svalbard Archipelago. These islands – roughly 700 miles from Russia's naval bases – could, if captured, secure Russian submarines' ability to patrol their Arctic bastion.

This makes the maritime wing of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) a vital strategic project, not just for the defence of

TABLE 1: MAJOR WARSHIP COMBATANTS[1]

	Aircraft carriers	Cruisers	Destroyers	Frigates	Submarines	Total
Russia	0	4	11	20	59	94
European NATO	6*	0	12	120	68	206
United States	11*	11	77	0	65	164

*European aircraft carrier numbers include three smaller aircraft carriers, while the American number excludes amphibious assault ships that can operate Vertical Take-Off and Landing (VTOL) aircraft.

Europe, but to contest Russia's ambition to extend its territorial waters in the Arctic, obliging merchant ships to pay transit fees and seek its permission to transit the Northern Sea Route.

The Baltic Sea constitutes a second point of contestation. Since the accession of Finland and Sweden to the alliance, policymakers have dubbed it a 'NATO lake'. Russia, however, is unlikely to concede this body of water – in peacetime or in war – without a fight.

Ukraine has taught Russia painful lessons about how an inferior navy can employ naval drones and missiles to deny sea control to a superior one. As such, the Kremlin would likely use such asymmetric technologies to deny the Baltic Sea to NATO navies in a future war.

In peacetime too, Russia uses the Baltic Sea as a venue for sub-threshold aggression, as shallow waters and a profusion of underwater cables render it an ideal theatre for such operations. Considering that 60% of Russia's crude oil exports transit the Baltic, it is likely to deploy whatever means it can muster to deter Europe from interfering with these.[2]

Finally, to the south of the European continent are four interlinked seas – the Caspian, Black, Mediterranean, and Red – which form the crux of the Kremlin's power projection ambitions. Since the reign of Catherine the Great, Russia has deployed fleets to these seas to bolster its allies and intimidate its adversaries. While NATO analysts tend to view these waters as distinct, Russian strategists consider them to be interconnected, and shift their forces deftly between them. When the Kremlin intervened in Syria in 2015, for example, it shifted elements of the Black Sea Fleet into the Mediterranean to support Bashar al-Assad and intimidate states which supported the uprising against his regime.

Although the ships employed for these duties did not impress NATO naval officers, they conveyed a message of power across the southern Mediterranean: Algeria, Egypt, and Iran each sought arms deals and cooperation agreements with Russia.[3]

Today, the Kremlin is seeking to perpetuate its ability to project power in the Mediterranean – even beyond – by negotiating basing deals with the Sudanese Armed Forces, Libyan factions, and the new Syrian regime.[4] By fomenting factionalism and state failure on land, it gains an important foothold in the maritime domain.

As the map shows, to enhance the defence of Europe, the United Kingdom (UK) has strengthened its commitment to NATO and pursued key bilateral and minilateral agreements, most recently welcoming Ukraine as an 'enhanced partner' of the JEF.

Given the decision of both Poland and Germany to rebuild their land forces, Britain's unique attributes – a historic maritime power, nuclear-armed, and with nodes of sovereignty positioned at important European naval chokepoints – suggest that it should adopt a complementary focus on the sea and air domains.[5]

As the map shows, the UK's presence beyond the British Isles, in Gibraltar, and in Cyprus leave it uniquely placed to challenge Russian aggression and power projection in the Mediterranean-Black-Red sea complex.

With a combat radius of up to 1,093 kilometres, the Royal Air Force's (RAF) new fleet of dual-capable F-35A Lightning II Joint Combat Aircraft should enhance the UK's ability to put adversaries' assets at risk in each of the three directions identified, adding the option of sub-strategic retaliation to any nuclear aggression.[6]

As NATO allies strengthen their resolve in the face of the Russian threat, the challenge – as specified in the National Security Strategy – is to come out of the habitual 'defensive crouch' assumed since the end of the Cold War, and begin posing new and asymmetric challenges to the Kremlin in the maritime sphere.[6] Britain is stronger than is often thought.

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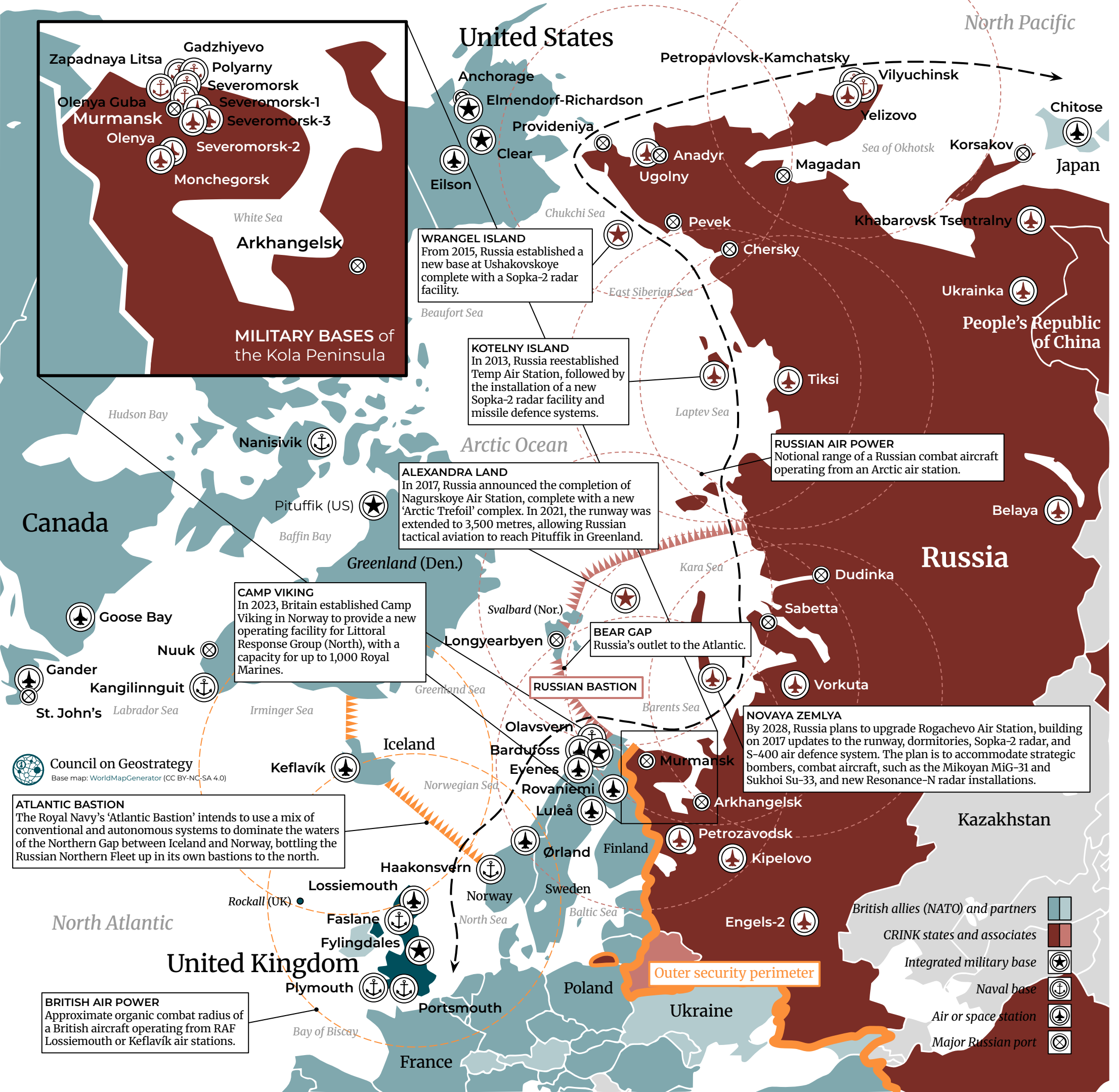
Biographies

- **Dr Marc De Vore** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy, an Associate Fellow at the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre, and a Senior Lecturer in the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews. His research centres on the Black Sea region and the revisionist challenge to the post-Cold War order posed by Russia.

- **Paul Mason** is an Adjunct Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy and an independent author and journalist. Previously, he was Economics Editor at *BBC Newsnight* and later at Channel 4 News. He writes a weekly column for *The New World* magazine.


MILITARY BASES of the Kola Peninsula
Zapadnaya Litsa
Gadzhiyevo
Polyarny
Severomorsk
Severomorsk-1
Severomorsk-3
Severomorsk-2
Olenya Guba
Murmansk
Olenya
Monchegorsk
White Sea
Arkhangelsk
United States
Anchorage
Elmendorf-Richardson
Provideniya
Clear
Eilson
Chukchi Sea
Beaufort Sea
WRANGEL ISLAND
From 2015, Russia established a new base at Ushakovskoye complete with a Sopka-2 radar facility.
KOTELNY ISLAND
In 2013, Russia reestablished Temp Air Station, followed by the installation of a new Sopka-2 radar facility and missile defence systems.
Hudson Bay
Nanisivik
Arctic Ocean
ALEXANDRA LAND
In 2017, Russia announced the completion of Nagurskoye Air Station, complete with a new 'Arctic Trefoil' complex. In 2021, the runway was extended to 3,500 metres, allowing Russian tactical aviation to reach Pituffik in Greenland.
Canada
Pituffik (US)
Baffin Bay
Greenland (Den.)
CAMP VIKING
In 2023, Britain established Camp Viking in Norway to provide a new operating facility for Littoral Response Group (North), with a capacity for up to 1,000 Royal Marines.
Goose Bay
Nuuk
Gander
Kangilinnguit
St. John's
Labrador Sea
Irminger Sea
Greenland Sea
Svalbard (Nor.)
Longyearbyen
BEAR GAP
Russia's outlet to the Atlantic.
RUSSIAN BASTION
Barents Sea
Kara Sea
Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky
Vilyuchinsk
Yelizovo
Chitose
Japan
Sea of Okhotsk
Korsakov
Anadyr
Ugolny
Magadan
Pevek
Chersky
Khabarovsk Tsentralny
East Siberian Sea
Ukrainka
People's Republic of China
Tiksi
Laptev Sea
RUSSIAN AIR POWER
Notional range of a Russian combat aircraft operating from an Arctic air station.
Belaya
Russia
Dudinka
Sabetta
Vorkuta
NOVAYA ZEMLYA
By 2028, Russia plans to upgrade Rogachevo Air Station, building on 2017 updates to the runway, dormitories, Sopka-2 radar, and S-400 air defence system. The plan is to accommodate strategic bombers, combat aircraft, such as the Mikoyan MiG-31 and Sukhoi Su-33, and new Resonance-N radar installations.
Olavsvern
Bardufoss
Evenes
Rovaniemi
Luleå
Murmansk
Arkhangelsk
Petrozavodsk
Kipelovo
Kazakhstan
Iceland
Keflavík
Norwegian Sea
Ørland
Finland
Haakonsvern
Lossiemouth
Rockall (UK)
Faslane
Fylingdales
Norway
Sweden
Baltic Sea
North Sea
North Atlantic
Engels-2
United Kingdom
Plymouth
Portsmouth
Poland
Ukraine
Outer security perimeter
BRITISH AIR POWER
Approximate organic combat radius of a British aircraft operating from RAF Lossiemouth or Keflavík air stations.
Bay of Biscay
France
ATLANTIC BASTION
The Royal Navy's 'Atlantic Bastion' intends to use a mix of conventional and autonomous systems to dominate the waters of the Northern Gap between Iceland and Norway, bottling the Russian Northern Fleet up in its own bastions to the north.
Council on Geostrategy
Base map: WorldMapGenerator (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)
British allies (NATO) and partners
CRINK states and associates
Integrated military base
Naval base
Air or space station
Major Russian port

12. The Wider North

BY PROF. KLAUS DODDS AND PROF. CAROLINE KENNEDY-PIPE

The Wider North has assumed global geopolitical importance. The Arctic is being buffeted by two fundamental forces – environmental change and geopolitical turbulence. Northern land, ice, and ocean areas are experiencing unprecedented warming, in some cases 6-7 times the global average, as in Svalbard and the Barents Sea. Multi-year ice is retreating, glaciers are receding, and permafrost – both land and subsea – is thawing. The resultant terraforming is scrambling strategic knowledge of the Arctic.

As shown on the map, there are eight Arctic states. The largest is Russia, representing approximately 50% of the terrestrial Arctic region. Iceland, the smallest, lies at the strategically important interface of the North Atlantic and the Arctic Sea. Since 2014, the deterioration of relations between Russia and the other seven Arctic states, now all North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members, has had a precipitous impact on circumpolar collaboration. Since its deployment into Ukraine, Russia's Arctic Brigade has suffered heavy losses, while bases in the Russian Arctic – such as the Olenya base near Murmansk – have suffered from Ukrainian drone strikes.

Under Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, the Kremlin has re-emphasised the strategic importance of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) as a resource heartland, as a strategic transport waterway in the Northern Sea Route and as home to its Northern Fleet and nuclear deterrent. Arctic bases from the Soviet era have been reactivated and modernised.

The modernisation programme notably accelerated in both Alexandra Land and Franz Josef Land after 2012. The upgrading and refurbishment programmes included the construction of the Arctic Trefoil military complex, the largest human-made structure that far north. Russian assets extend from the Kola Peninsula to stations and facilities across five regional seas.

The Bear Gap – between North Cape, Bear Island, and further north to Svalbard – is where the Barents Sea meets the deeper Norwegian Sea, and thereafter the North Atlantic. Control of the Bear Gap is vital to the defence of the Northern Fleet's ballistic missile nuclear-powered submarines (SSBNs) in the eastern Barents Sea. Svalbard remains of intense interest, and Russian activities to challenge Norwegian authority over the archipelago will only deepen.

Based in the Kola Peninsula – as shown on the inset map – the Northern Fleet contains 26 submarines. Yasen class boats protect the ballistic missile fleet and underpin perimeter defence, enabling Russia to project firepower over the northern Norwegian Sea and the North Atlantic if necessary. Russian combat aircraft and strategic bombers, such as the Mikoyan MiG-31, Sukhoi Su-35, and Tupolev Tu-95, have standoff missile ranges, which means that an aircraft taking off from Alexandra Land could assault the United States' (US) Pituffik space station in Greenland. Joint Russian and Chinese aerial patrols in and around the Bering Strait and the Alaskan Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) have also raised concerns for military assets in Alaska.[1]

A revived 'bastion' defence concept, which in Soviet times included both the Pacific and Europe, is now focused on the Kola Peninsula. The strategic objective is to ensure that the peninsula is protected by an Anti-Access and Area-Denial (A2/AD) complex, which stretches to cover the Bear Gap. This is important if, for example, NATO were to blockade the Baltic Fleet. NATO members are modernising islands in the Baltic Sea, such as Bornholm, stationing permanent personnel on land, and enhancing maritime surveillance.

The bastion offers an anti-missile shield, which is designed to protect critical infrastructure and the Northern Fleet. Russia is also developing (facilitated by covert purchasing of technologies from its adversaries) an underwater surveillance network named 'Harmony' (*Garmoniya*). This aims to create a defensive cordon, or 'net', around the Northern Fleet, operating from Murmansk eastward to Novaya Zemlya, and north to Franz Josef Land. It is intended to detect enemy submarines using seabed sensors, sonar arrays, and underwater drones.

Russia's Pacific Fleet is protected by a ring of defences including missile systems, air defences, and ground forces. Its submarines are becoming more active in the waters north of Japan, while there is deepening Russian-Chinese military cooperation in these areas. Additionally, in January 2018, the People's Republic of China (PRC) declared itself to be a

'near-Arctic' state and legitimate stakeholder in polar affairs.[2]

Operation SPIDER'S WEB, the Ukrainian kinetic attack on the Olenya base in June 2025, demonstrated that drone strikes and Electronic Warfare (EW) can burst A2/AD security bubbles. Despite the shock of this strike, Russia continues to invest in and test hypersonic missiles and underwater drones, alongside submarines and surface vessels. There are, however, questions over whether these defences could survive saturating drone strikes.

Such a prospect mandates that the Kremlin invest in electronic countermeasures. Russian EW units in the Kola Peninsula have escalated EW activity, interfering with civilian aviation and satellite navigation systems in Norway's Finnmark region. Underwater sabotage is another element in Russia's sub-threshold activities in the Wider North and Baltic Sea.[3]

Russia emphasises the importance of social and economic developments in its northern territories for its military posture and operations. Thus, its armed forces have a dual role – supporting and supplying communities as well as ensuring the security of Russian interests both onshore and offshore, with a focus on ensuring perimeter control and sea denial over the vast AZRF.

Since 2014, the United Kingdom (UK) has released three Arctic policy frameworks stressing the strategic, scientific, commercial, and environmental importance of the Wider North. The scientific vessel Royal Research Ship (RRS) Sir David Attenborough has undertaken Arctic cruises, and, in 2021, the Royal Navy's ice patrol vessel HMS Protector sailed further north than any other Royal Navy ship, nearly reaching the North Pole while conducting ice and environmental research.

The map serves as a reminder that British military posture in the Wider North is shaped by three elements. After decades of training in Norway, the opening of Camp Viking in northern Norway in 2023 for up to 1,000 Royal Marines was established as part of the Littoral Response Group (North).[4] Alongside the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), NATO allies – including the US, Iceland, and Norway – established a responsibility to protect the waters and airspace of the Northern Gap (between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK or Norway).

The Royal Air Force's (RAF) maritime patrol aircraft, based at RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland, play a crucial role in NATO's underwater domain awareness. Each P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft carries 129 sonobuoys (expandable sonar buoys dropped from aircraft for undersea acoustic research and detection).[5]

Britain's nuclear deterrent is also being upgraded with the introduction of Dreadnought class SSBNs and a life extension programme for the Trident II D5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

The UK has nine P-8As (compared to a peak of 35 Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft in the 1980s).[6] Detecting Russian submarines is considerably harder now than during the Cold War. The Royal Navy introduced its 'Atlantic Bastion' concept in 2025 to highlight the need for further investment in crewed and uncrewed capabilities, operating above and below the surface as part of a robust Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capability.

As the North Atlantic marine environment transforms from ice loss, technologies will evolve to track and deter enemy submarines and drones more effectively. Surface vessels, such as Type 26 class and Type 31 class frigates, will support underwater and aerial detection via hull-mounted sonars, ASW helicopters, and towed hydrophones. In September 2024, Exercise AGILE SHIELD acknowledged the potential vulnerability of RAF Lossiemouth to kinetic drone strikes, with plans subsequently developed to remove P-8As to the Southwest of England.

Britain should prepare for war in the Wider North. While it should hope for the best, it must also prepare for the worst.

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Biographies

- **Prof. Klaus Dodds** is a Senior Research Fellow at RAND Europe and Honorary Professor of Geopolitics at Royal Holloway, University of London. His latest book is *Unfrozen: The Fight for the Future of the Arctic* (co-authored with Mia Bennett). He has advised UK Parliamentary committees, NATO and the European Parliament on geopolitical and environmental security challenges.

- **Prof. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe** is Professor of War Studies at the University of Loughborough. She has held visiting positions at the University of Lille, the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Southern Denmark, and the Rothermere Institute, University of Oxford. From 2018 to 2019, she was a Specialist Adviser to the Defence Committee in the House of Commons.

Conclusion

BY JAMES ROGERS AND ANDREW YOUNG

It would be wrong to view each of the previous 12 visualisations as independent snapshots of the United Kingdom's (UK) place in the world in the late 2020s. To see these maps, cartograms, and infographics in isolation is to miss the point. Rather, they should be seen as a series of interlocking layers, which reveal a broader picture of the country's geopolitical position and interests, as well as its potential.

Britain's standing has been charted inside and out: from its complex but concentrated national powerbase (Map 1) and its substantial economic output (Map 2), to the dispersed spread of its overseas territories, diplomatic posts, and undersea cables (Maps 3 and 4). The foundations and diffusion of the UK's power have then been set against a shifting and increasingly dangerous world: one of competing centres of geopolitical power (Map 5); a growing alignment between adversaries (Map 6); and the regions – crunch zones – in which their expansive, destabilising thrusts are playing out (Map 7).

In response, Britain's own geostrategic posture has been mapped, including the country's web of allies and partners (Map 8) and the worldwide reach of the Royal Navy (Map 9). The strategy of security has been visualised across the connected Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres (Map 10), in relation to the Euro-Atlantic core (Map 11) and, increasingly, the Wider North (Map 12). What these projections show is that, for all the gloomy prognosis of recent years, the UK is well-placed to seize new opportunities and shore up established relationships, irrespective of – indeed, perhaps even because of – the threats that are beginning to manifest themselves.

What binds all of these maps together is the sea. As an archipelagic state, Britain is surrounded by seas and oceans, which act both as a barrier and a superhighway to the wider world. But geography is not destiny; and strategy is not entirely determined by it. As Spykman put it: 'to admit that the garment must ultimately be cut to fit the cloth is not to say that the cloth determines either the garment's style or its adequacy.'[1]

The UK could fight its own geography. One option would be to focus on continental Europe, deploying more ground and air forces along the central front to deter Russia. But, as Map 11 shows, this would neglect the critical maritime flanks, both of the British Isles and even of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) itself. If the UK fails to prioritise these regions, Russia could surge to pose a threat from the rear, making it harder for Britain to reach into the Indo-Pacific. And Poland and Germany already have substantial terrestrial military modernisation programmes underway, which the UK would do well not to duplicate.

Another choice would be for Britain to 'tilt' further into the Indo-Pacific. The extent to which the country has already tilted has often been over-exaggerated: the 2021 Integrated Review and all subsequent security and defence reviews have seen it as a supplementary theatre. What most analysts have overlooked, though, is that the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) means that the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific are blurring into one another: Chinese support for Russia, for example, has facilitated the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine. For that reason, the two regions cannot be anything other than interlinked in the UK's strategic policy. AUKUS is now central to delivering the Royal Navy's next generation of nuclear submarines – and these will be deployed in Atlantic waters even more than they will be in those of the Indo-Pacific.

One final option would be for Britain to embrace a more limited regional posture or become little more than a donor to good causes. These approaches have become popular both on the political right and left in recent years. While enticing, they would be deeply destructive to the national wellbeing: the UK is not Switzerland or Sweden, even if it possesses a nuclear deterrent. Its economy depends on a network of maritime communication lines and undersea cables that connect it to the world – and as Artificial Intelligence (AI) advances, those data cables will only become more important.

Britain needs a rooted approach. In the words of Gen. Sir Gwyn Jenkins, First Sea Lord: 'Our work remains fundamentally the same as it has for hundreds of years – keep the sea lanes open, protect our nation from seaborne attack, promote and defend our national interests around the world.'[2] If the UK attempted a retreat from geopolitical competition, history and current threat assessments suggest that the repercussions of such disengagement would soon be felt on British soil.

CONSOLIDATING BRITAIN'S POSITION: MARITIME STATE, PIVOTAL POWER

As the world grows more dangerous, the National Security Strategy calls on the UK to 'sharpen' its 'focus on the arenas of current and future competition', through the adoption of an asymmetric approach in concert with allies and partners.[3] This will be critical to deterring hostile, revisionist forces, and sustaining – even growing and developing – the national powerbase on which the country depends. Luckily, Britain has a natural asymmetry; while most nations are land-focused, the UK looks out across the sea. The Royal Navy remains Britain's most powerful weapon – it is the first line of defence and the principal means of attack.

Navies can also be leveraged for diplomatic and geostrategic impact. Naval power enhances the UK's 'strategic indispensability', putting it at the heart of a network of alliances and minilateral relationships, from NATO and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) to AUKUS and the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). With further cultivation and refinement, Britain could emerge as the pivotal power of the mid-21st century. Not a superpower, certainly, but a country pivotal to the world's most important strategic relationships – frameworks which can be leveraged to multiply the UK's own geopolitical impact.

But more than that, maritime power is asymmetric in that operating at sea requires ever more advanced technology and financial systems. The old fiscal-naval state that once powered Britain's rise cannot be recreated, but its principle – that national wealth and naval power are mutually sustaining – remains as true as ever. Re-establishing that virtuous cycle demands investment not just in vessels and harbours, but in technological enablers, human capital, and industrial plant.

For practitioners, this means reframing the maritime not as a costly ledger, but as a national growth engine. The numbers are instructive: maritime industries contribute over £116 billion in turnover – more than rail and aviation combined – yet remain politically peripheral.[4] A modern maritime strategy must integrate the civil and defence enterprise – shipyards, ports, offshore energy, digital infrastructure, logistics, and marine science – into a coherent economic narrative. Promoting growth across the nation, especially in coastal spaces, is central to this effort.

With the 'New Hybrid Navy' – a mixed fleet of crewed and uncrewed systems – the nation has the vision and the driver it needs to recapitalise and rebuild its maritime strength. To borrow language from the original Articles of War, it will be upon this new navy – and by extension the maritime enterprise – that the 'safety, honour, and welfare of this realm do chiefly depend.'[5]

In sum, this geopolitical atlas has charted the sea's absolute centrality to the UK's entire national enterprise. As it looks to the 2030s, Britain has the potential to draw together its geographic position, its national powerbase, its growing relative strength, and its global networks, including its diplomatic and defensive nodes, as well as its allies and partners, into a self-reinforcing maritime system. If it manages to resource, integrate, and especially focus its armed forces on the Royal Navy, it has the potential to emerge in a truly enviable position by the mid-21st century – pivotal to the geopolitics of the world.

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CONTACT

Email: info@geostrategy.org.uk
Phone: 0044 (0) 20 3915 5625
Address: Alliance House, 12 Caxton Street, London, SW1H 0QS.

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