Conducting a strategic defense and security review is challenging under any circumstances. What appears to be the straightforward task of laying out the country’s national security interests and the government’s plan for promoting and defending them quickly meets the reality of political mandates, unchallenged “sacred cows,” competing budget priorities, legacy commitments, and an international security environment that is continually in flux.

This is no less true in the case of the United Kingdom’s upcoming Integrated Security and Defense Review (IR), which has just started and which aims to conclude by the end of the year. The level of political ambition is high: Prime Minister Boris Johnson has promised a comprehensive rethink that will lead to greater integration of defense, security, and foreign policy, as well as a “huge technological upgrade” in the way the United Kingdom operates. In essence, it charts the course for the United Kingdom’s post-Brexit foreign policy.

In some instances, decisions are being made ahead of the baseline analysis—as in the case of Johnson’s announcement that the Department for International Development will be merged into the Foreign Office, or of the spending commitments set out in his party’s election-winning manifesto from November 2019.

Determined to defend its equities, the Ministry of Defense is publicizing what cuts it would have to impose under a worst-case budget scenario, including further manpower reductions to the Army and Royal Marines—something the Conservative manifesto pointedly refused to rule out. This is intended to inspire traditional supporters of a strong UK conventional defense, both in the British media and abroad, to come to its rescue. Add to this the pressure that Covid-19 is placing on government resources, and there is ample opportunity for a review that is at once overly ambitious and under-resourced.

ORDER AMID CHAOS
In some ways, the timing is ideal for an IR. Occurring on the heels of the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union on January 31 of this year, a strategic review offers an opportunity to reposition the United Kingdom in a post-Brexit world. The two relationships that have been the main mediums for executing Britain’s foreign policy—its EU membership and its uniquely close relationship with the United States—are shifting under its feet. Meanwhile,
the main vehicles by which the United Kingdom executes its security policy—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its bilateral security relationship with France—are becoming even more important after Brexit.

The Trump administration has laid bare the risks for the United Kingdom if it relies too heavily on a United States that has become more erratic, nationally and narrowly self-interested, and prone to retrenchment. Similarly, negotiations with the European Union over its future relationship with the United Kingdom post-Brexit have revealed real divergences on competition rules, the role of the European Court of Justice, and the extent to which the United Kingdom should continue to be bound by EU law. In negotiating its future trading relationships with both of these economic superpowers, the United Kingdom may soon have to choose which set of trading standards and preferences it adopts and which it rejects. Similarly, in the field of foreign policy and defense, Brexit may make it harder for the United Kingdom to straddle the views emanating from Brussels and Washington D.C.

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As the United Kingdom charts its own path, it must do more than to revert to campaign slogans or to define itself by what it is not (e.g., not a member of the European Union). The United Kingdom must take a step toward defining itself either as a strong and capable regional security actor (whose influence stretches from the Arctic to the Middle East) or a global conventional actor (with power projection capabilities stretching its defense resources toward the Indo-Pacific). In other words, the United Kingdom has stood at a security “fork in the road” for some time, which is why this Integrated Review, if properly done, can offer a map for the road selected. Strategic reviews usually come every five years, and a good one begins with a strong policy baseline that defines a country’s vision of what it stands for and what it is willing to do. In other words, we expect this review to answer the question: what are the United Kingdom’s values and interests, and how do these translate into national security objectives?

BRITAIN AT HOME AND IN THE WORLD

Instinctively, the United Kingdom remains a “status quo” power. It takes its position as a nuclear power and permanent member of the UN Security Council seriously, and it is committed to meeting NATO’s defense spending benchmark of 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as well as the 0.7 percent of Gross National Income (GNI) spending target for overseas development aid. The economic fallout from both the coronavirus pandemic and Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union will strain both of these commitments. The United Kingdom is reflexively a proponent and protector of the international system, which has brought it into conflict with its most important security partner, the United States, as the latter unilaterally withdraws from key elements of the international system (namely, arms control regimes and non-proliferation agreements).

The United Kingdom’s 2010 and 2015 Strategic Defense and Security Reviews set out the dual objectives of securing UK interests at home and helping to shape a stable world. A similar construct is likely to prevail in the 2020 review—balancing prosperity, security, and resilience at home with the projection of UK influence abroad.

Domestic resilience has been a consistent focus of the past two defense and security reviews, and it continues to be a major theme in this IR as well. The term is broad, covering such things as building economic, energy, and infrastructure resilience; enhancing cyber capabilities; withstanding natural and man-made disasters; and combatting terrorism and malign influence activities. While the terrorism threat has not disappeared—Britain saw a series of deadly terror attacks in 2017—the United Kingdom is now better at anticipating, averting, and responding to terror attacks, although it continues to be challenged by “lone wolf” events. However, if the United Kingdom does not forge a new security relationship with the European Union by the end of the year, it will have even greater law enforcement challenges, which may reduce its resiliency.

Similarly, the United Kingdom has improved its ability to combat influence and disinformation activities by building societal resilience, for example through media literacy programs and reforms to its campaign finances law. But as a recent Intelligence and Security Committee report suggests—and as the government itself acknowledges—there continue to be significant loopholes in the approach of Her Majesty’s Government. However, the United
Kingdom is moving toward greater integration between government departments as their preferred route to improve government and tighten security.

The term “Global Britain,” introduced in 2016 by then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, has yet to be defined as anything other than a post-Brexit aspiration in which the United Kingdom takes on greater international responsibilities. While it is true that the United Kingdom has a global outlook and meaningful capabilities, it has yet to make difficult decisions about how much it is willing to sacrifice in order to reform and modernize the international system, and it faces pressing domestic economic challenges.

Clearly, the United Kingdom is doubling down on NATO. Last year, for example, after hosting the NATO Leaders’ Meeting in December (in celebration of NATO’s 70th anniversary), it led efforts to integrate national cyber capabilities or “offensive cyber” into NATO operations and missions. The appointment of John Bew as both the lead for the United Kingdom’s Integrated Review and the country’s representative to NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg’s Reflection Process will ensure synergy between the two processes. NATO and the United Kingdom are both struggling to address China as a holistic challenge while finding the right balance of resource allocation for the task, as well as managing the security risks of China’s strategic investments in Europe and the Middle East.

The United Kingdom’s future defense relationship with the European Union is unknowable at this moment, but the hope is that pragmatism (built on bilateral defense cooperation and in particular Franco-British cooperation, as the 10th anniversary of the Lancaster House agreement attests) will prevail. But this challenge should be understood in the European context as well: before Brexit, the UK defense budget was the largest of all EU member states, and its procurement spending accounted for 25 percent of all EU spending. It is also one of the few countries in the region, other than France, to have a strong strategic culture and global mindset. The European Union must therefore continue to be a key partner to the United Kingdom on counterterrorism and combatting malign influence activities, and vice versa.

Global Britain will be a more dynamic foreign and security policy place: in some policy areas, like the Iran nuclear agreement, the United Kingdom will side with France and Germany, while in other areas, like focused sanctions on Russia or Turkey’s regional policies, it will go against the European Union. The United Kingdom may align more with the United States on China, but it may also be required to challenge the United States when they view U.S. actions as misguided or wrong. The United Kingdom will prioritize the use of the UN Security Council, where the dynamism between EU and U.S. positions is likely to be in play. But where the United Kingdom may seize the greatest advantage is in its new role as convener of likeminded democracies around the world (in part due to U.S. abdication), including India, Japan, and Australia. It has already attempted to do so on constructing alternatives to Huawei’s dominance over 5G technology (the so-called D10), for instance. Its upcoming role of chair of the G7 in 2021 is another opportunity for the United Kingdom to seize control, but it will take sustained policy focus and resource investment to achieve this outcome. Increasingly, it is not about the institution, but about the effect that the United Kingdom wishes to achieve in a particular instance.

Finally, the Security and Defense Review will be an opportunity for Britain to rediscover and relaunch its soft power, which has decreased from its zenith during the
2012 London Olympics. Brexit, the pandemic response, and perhaps the politicization of its development assistance will have diminished the United Kingdom’s image abroad. This IR should be used as an instrument to unlock the United Kingdom’s latent soft power, and it can be viewed as restorative to multilateral and values-based diplomacy and foreign policy in an era of great power competition.

MODERNIZING DEFENSE
Although the IR encompasses security and foreign policy, it remains a defense review at its core, and this is often where the biggest costs—and hence major tradeoffs—occur. In the early days of the IR, two competing visions on how to balance tasks and resources have emerged.

The first vision argues for a greater focus on trade and prosperity than on hard-edged security. The United Kingdom’s announcement this week of its establishment of a global human rights sanctions regime (fashioned on the U.S. Global Sergei Magnitsky Act) suggests a move in this direction. While economic investment and defense sales can be powerful “carrots and sticks,” they often collide with a values-based foreign policy. This is especially true in the case of China, where former Prime Minister David Cameron’s “prosperity agenda” and “Golden Era” quickly met the reality of China’s unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and authoritarian foreign policy.

The second vision, advanced by Prime Minister Johnson’s chief advisor Dominic Cummings, pushes for greater reliance on technology and innovation and unmanned platforms such as cyber, space, and artificial intelligence, as well as psychological warfare. Depending on the size of the overall defense budget, this shift could come at a considerable cost to the United Kingdom’s conventional forces—and to the Army and Royal Marines in particular. While there are policy choices to be made about the size and roles of the conventional forces and the platforms that enable them, the choice between conventional forces and high-end platforms is not binary: the latter work best when they are well integrated into the former. Likewise, investing in emerging technologies is not a panacea for an underinvestment in conventional defense.
SHOW ME THE POUNDS

The final—and arguably the most vexing—piece of the puzzle is affordability. With multiple departments vying for resources under the IR, tough prioritization and trade-offs are inevitable. Flexibility will be constrained by the Conservative manifesto commitments, namely: to continue exceeding the NATO target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, to increase the defense budget by at least 0.5 percent above inflation every year of the new Parliament, and to maintain spending 0.7 percent of GNI on development aid.

As noted above, the economic strain of managing Brexit and the Covid-19 crisis will challenge the United Kingdom to produce a coherent, strategy-driven, resource-informed review. It is unclear whether this will be a budget cutting/balancing exercise, as was the case with the 2010 Strategic Defense and Security Review; if so, there will be significant concern from the United States (as there was following the cut of the 2010 SDSR). That said, the UK Government has demonstrated a penchant for spending its way out of its problems despite the dire fiscal picture—as seen in its significant investments in “leveling up” rural and northern areas—and may yet continue to do so to preserve Britain’s global brand in this time of transition.

CONCLUSION

Most SDSRs are remembered for their flaws and dramatic reductions in capabilities (e.g., aircraft carriers without jets or scrapping maritime patrol aircraft only to restore them later). This one may follow a similar path. However, this review could also set a new strategic direction for the United Kingdom, if it ambitiously seeks to do so—as well as restore a sense of greater coherence and purpose for British foreign and security policy, something which has been sadly missing for the past four years.

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This brief is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this brief.

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