

# COUNTRY CHAPTER ON THE UNITED KINGDOM

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# THE UK DISCOURSE ON NATO'S FUTURE

**Dirk Peters**

## THE UNITED KINGDOM IN NATO

NATO is the key international institution in British security policy. And Britain, in turn, is a key European member of NATO. It is a nuclear power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it has the ambition to have globally deployable armed forces and it usually spends more than 2 per cent of its GDP on defence. The country was instrumental in creating NATO after the Second World War and has remained a staunch supporter of the transatlantic alliance during and since the Cold War. At times, maintaining close ties to the United States – under the aegis of the so-called »special relationship« – appears to be a goal in itself for British security policy. In keeping with this basic policy orientation, British governments have usually been critical of attempts to give the EU greater weight in defence policy. While Tony Blair's Labour government helped to create what was to become the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict, successive governments have been highly reluctant to support its further development. Brexit has complicated the situation for Britain somewhat. It has made the transatlantic link even more significant for Britain, but at the same time has potentially reduced the value of this link for the United States as the United Kingdom will no longer be able to influence EU decision-making in the defence realm directly.

In this context, the United Kingdom is currently seeking to redefine its foreign, security and defence policy. In March 2021, it published its *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (HM Government 2021), which identifies two crucial challenges for UK defence policy:

- (i) the need to enhance capabilities, especially to guard against Russia, »the most acute threat« in the Euro-Atlantic area (p. 71); and
- (ii) the need for an »Indo-Pacific tilt« (pp. 66–67) and to respond to »China's increasing power and assertiveness« (p. 24 et passim).

This reflects concerns that also dominate the discourse on the future of NATO among Britain's leading security think tanks. There is widespread agreement within this discourse that NATO faces two significant, yet different challenges in

relation to Russia and China. Whereas Russia is viewed as a direct threat to the security of NATO members, China is regarded as a challenger that might, over time, evolve into a more directly threatening actor. There is also a third challenge to NATO that is highlighted throughout the discourse: maintaining (or restoring) internal cohesion. The list of internal disagreements that need to be tackled is long but transatlantic burden-sharing and French-led efforts to achieve European autonomy are most often identified as key problems.

Think tanks widely agree on the best way to tackle most of these problems: enhancing European capabilities. This will help to counter the Russian threat, to safeguard against China at least in the long term, to ease disagreements over burden-sharing and it could even satisfy those striving for more European autonomy. There are differences in emphasis and, especially with respect to China, other measures are discussed. But European capabilities remain a recurrent theme in the British discourse. And this is yet another point of agreement between the British think tank discourse about the future of NATO and the UK government's recent *Integrated Review*. In its ambitious plan to strengthen British capabilities, the UK government not only seeks to maintain its own position in the Alliance but also to lead by example and prod other European allies to invest in their capabilities as well.

## TWO MAIN CHALLENGERS: RUSSIA AND CHINA

### RUSSIA

British think tanks regard Russia as a real military threat to the alliance, especially given its willingness to change borders in Europe, as illustrated by the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The core challenge lies in Russia's hybrid approach to NATO. Notwithstanding a number of publications on cyber security and societal resilience (such as Kendall-Taylor/Edmonds 2019; Afina et al. 2020), however, the main focus of British discourse is on the military side of this threat. There is extensive discussion of Russia's military capabilities and how they affect NATO members' security. The IISS, in particular, discusses scenarios involving Russian attacks on Lithuania and Poland or multiple flashpoints on the eastern

flank, arriving at recommendations on how to prepare for or guard against such contingencies (Barrie et al. 2019, 2020). Vulnerabilities are mainly seen on NATO's eastern flank but some also point to the Arctic or the »Wider North« (Arctic plus Baltic) (Boulègue 2018, 2019b; Kennedy-Pipe/Depledge 2019). RUSI's Peter Roberts (2019) even posits that Russia has expanded its influence so much »that it is the turn of NATO's European continental members to feel encircled«.

The advice concerning Russia is twofold. On one hand, there is a strong emphasis on enhancing capabilities and deterring Russia from military action. Europeans, in particular, are advised to take Russia's posture into account when deciding about capability development (Barrie et al. 2019, 2020). Recommendations for NATO as a whole include the reinforcement of its forward presence, strengthening NATO's »capacity to degrade Russian anti-access weapons« (Efjestad/Tamnes 2019: 17) and clarifying how the alliance would respond to the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons (Kendall-Taylor/Edmonds 2019: 6465). On the other hand, there are individual voices advocating that NATO should »continue its dual strategy of combining deterrence and meaningful dialogue« and engage in dialogue and confidence-building, especially with regard to arms control (Olsen 2020; see also Efjestad/Tamnes 2019: 21). Chatham House fellow Mathieu Boulègue (2019a, b), in particular, advocates a »dialogue of differences«, an institutionalized dialogue that would not aim at actually resolving differences but at clarifying them and explicating the »red lines« of both sides. This would help to avoid miscalculation and unintentionally drifting into an armed conflict. He also suggests that such a form of dialogue among NATO allies could help them to find a common stance and decrease Russian opportunities for undermining NATO cohesion.

## CHINA

There is a broad consensus in the British discourse that China represents a second important challenge for NATO allies. But it is a challenge that is significantly different from the one that Russia poses, especially because it does not (yet) concern NATO's core business of collective defence. Analyses point to China's global ambition and the ambitious modernization of its armed forces, as well as the fact that it has established cooperation with Russia, seeks to undermine NATO cohesion (for instance through disinformation campaigns) and is already expanding the reach of its forces closer to NATO territory (Barrie et al. 2020: 1012; Legarda/Nouwens 2019; Nouwens/Legarda 2020). Moreover, the expansion of economic cooperation between European allies and China is viewed as a potential source of dependency that could be turned against Europeans (Efjestad/Tamnes 2019: 19).

NATO's inability to formulate a joint approach towards China is seen as a crucial weakness of the alliance (Roberts 2019). The US openly treats China as a rival, whereas the European Union only recently moved to an assessment of China as »partner«, »competitor« and »rival«. Such differ-

ences in threat assessment potentially provide China with leverage for sowing disunity in the alliance (Nouwens/Legarda 2020: 7).

No one sees a direct military confrontation between China and NATO as a likely scenario. The advice for handling the China challenge, therefore, focuses on bolstering cohesion within NATO, finding regional partners to contain China and cooperating to reduce the danger of economic dependency. Internal cohesion can be improved by better exchanges of information and more intensive internal debate about the different approaches towards China to identify common concerns (Bond 2019; Efjestad/Tamnes 2019: 19; Legarda/Nouwens 2019). Intensified partnerships with countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including linking NATO to existing regional security arrangements there, are viewed as a promising way to respond to China's ambitions without seeking to expand NATO's area of operations (Pothier 2019; Nouwens/Legarda 2020: 15). Countering the danger of economic dependency is not viewed as a prime task for NATO, but some commentators argue that NATO cooperation with the EU could help to alleviate the problem. It would be easier for the EU, for example, to monitor the influx of foreign direct investment into critical sectors and to deal with the technological and economic challenges China poses (Efjestad/Tamnes 2019: 20; Nouwens/Legarda 2020).

## THE KEY INTERNAL CHALLENGE: COHESION

For most contributions to the British discourse, the key internal challenge that NATO faces is a lack of unity and cohesion. Trump's rhetoric, as well as Macron's »brain dead« comments, are popular points of reference for this diagnosis. The latter in particular have been heavily criticized by commentators from British think tanks (for a lone exception, see Chevallereau 2019). Even though Macron criticized the lack of cohesion himself, his remarks were widely regarded as further aggravating the key problem for NATO's cohesion: transatlantic differences over NATO's future and over burden-sharing or the contribution of Europeans to the overall defence effort. Other issues, especially the role of Turkey and regional differences in assessing external security challenges, receive less attention.

## BURDEN-SHARING AND EUROPEANISATION

The rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration put the differences between the United States and its European allies under the spotlight. But there is a common understanding that disputes over burden-sharing in the alliance will not go away now that the United States has returned to a more centrist foreign and security policy (for example, Besch/Scazzieri 2020). For the US, the key security challenges lie in the Asia-Pacific, while Europeans are clearly more focused on Russia. The differences are so stark that the IISS even contributed to a policy game that centred on a scenario in which the United States leaves NATO (Fix et al. 2019) and

developed scenarios concerning how Europeans could defend themselves against attack if the United States did not join their effort (Barrie et al. 2019).

The result of these scenarios and of almost all contributions to the debate is straightforward: it is in the best interest of Europeans to keep the United States engaged in Europe (Pothier 2019). This can be achieved, for example, by adjusting to US strategic priorities: »A new transatlantic bargain might have to be built on the notion that Europeans operate globally to help the US with its various contingencies in exchange for a reconfirmed US commitment to European security through NATO« (Barrie et al. 2020: 18; see also Legarda/Nouwens 2019).

More importantly, Europeans should enhance their military capabilities in order to keep the United States engaged. There is no shortage of recommendations concerning which capabilities are most important (for example, Barrie et al. 2019, 2020; Efstathiou 2019). Increasing defence spending is the obvious implication of this recommendation. How can this be achieved? There is a strong emphasis on pragmatism. NATO's 2 per cent target, for example, is often viewed critically, if interpreted too rigidly, but at the same time regarded as an important symbolic guidepost to induce Europeans to invest in capabilities (for example, Béraud-Sudreau/Giegerich 2018; Béraud-Sudreau/Childs 2018; Efstad/Tamnes 2019: 22; Besch 2018a). EU efforts to achieve strategic autonomy are viewed with similar pragmatism. It is not the institutional choice that matters but the creation of capabilities (Barrie et al. 2020; Besch 2019).

Where institutional questions are discussed there is a clear preference for focusing on NATO (Roberts 2020) and creating »a kind of European core within NATO« (Kundnani 2019) rather than organizing the European contribution within the EU. This, of course, would also make it easier for the United Kingdom to play a leading role.

This does not imply, however, that the EU is viewed as useless or as NATO's competitor. Some contributions point out that, as a »regulatory power«, the EU has tools to address certain challenges more effectively than NATO. This holds, for example, in the realms of cyber security, force mobility or defence-industrial cooperation (Besch 2019; Olsen 2020; Efstad/Tamnes 2019) and in improving resilience against hybrid tactics (Besch/Bond 2019; Kendall-Taylor/Edmonds 2019). However, the implication that it is in the best interest of Britain, too, to maintain close links to the EU is rarely spelled out (but see Shea 2020).

## A COMMUNITY OF VALUES?

NATO cohesion is threatened not only by transatlantic divergences. There are other fault-lines along which interests and values in the alliance diverge. These receive less attention in the British discourse. NATO members define their immediate security interests in different ways, with states on the eastern flank looking primarily towards Russia and states in

the South concerned mainly about instability around the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> There is also a noticeable divergence of values among NATO members because of the rise of populist leaders and autocratic tendencies in some states. In Turkey, both issues come together as the government attacks basic democratic institutions and defines Turkey's security interests in ways that may be harmful to those of other members (Chevallereau 2020; see also Besch/Bond 2019: 2; Scazzieri 2021).

Where these issues are discussed, the advice usually boils down to an appeal to common interests and common values. Leaders should return to consensus-building and to leading by example (Schake 2019) and to an awareness that »transatlantic security guarantees and collective defence in particular have to be rooted in a sense of solidarity, as well as shared values and interests between members of the community« (Efstathiou 2018). Focusing on shared democratic values could improve cohesion and give China and Russia fewer opportunities to exploit divergences among members (Olsen 2019, 2020).

There is little concrete advice, however, on how to actually achieve this. After all, as Chatham House's Jacob Parakilas (2019) puts it, NATO »reflects the internal politics of its membership to a far greater degree than it shapes them« and is not equipped to enforce values in its member states. Svein Efstad and Rolf Tamnes (2019: 10), contributing to a RUSI publication, make the rare proposal that NATO members should »make more vigorous use of its various venues and instruments, including the NATO Council, to scrutinise infringements of fundamental rights and abuse of power«. But even they hasten to add that other »organisations such as the Council of Europe and the EU have a more explicit obligation to enforce adherence to democratic values and human rights«.

## ARMS CONTROL

Arms control issues are mainly a specialist discourse in the United Kingdom and do not figure prominently in the broader debate about NATO's future. At times, the end of the INF is noted with some concern but mainly because it is yet another issue which makes divisions among NATO members visible (Raine 2019). The responsibility for the collapse of the INF is clearly assigned to Russia and Macron's proposal to study Russian proposals in this context has met with vehement criticism (Morrison/Heinrichs 2020).

NATO's nuclear policies receive some modest criticism because they are perceived as putting too little emphasis on disarmament. There are no calls for Britain to accede to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. However, there are calls for NATO not to stress its opposition to the

<sup>1</sup> The British discourse is no exception in this respect as Southern concerns are rarely discussed as an issue for NATO, whereas the Arctic and the Wider North figure somewhat more prominently (see below).

TPNW too strongly and instead to search for points of agreement with TPNW supporters and to play a more proactive role in nuclear disarmament. Only if NATO can demonstrate how its nuclear posture can be reconciled with the goal of nuclear disarmament, as enshrined in the NPT, can it expect non-proliferation to survive (Caughley/Afina 2020). The United Kingdom's recent *Integrated Review* highlights rather than alleviates this tension between the abstract goal of nuclear disarmament and actual reliance on nuclear weapons (for example, Williams 2021).

There is also advocacy work to save the Open Skies Treaty (European Leadership Network 2020) and for the United Kingdom to engage more proactively in arms control relating to the use of drones and Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (UNA-UK 2017).

es and capabilities accordingly (Boulègue 2018; Efstad/Tamnes 2019: 1617), but without militarizing the region itself (Boulègue 2019b).

## OTHER CHALLENGES FOR NATO

The defence of NATO's eastern flank against Russia and countering Chinese ambitions are the most prominent external challenges for NATO in the British discourse. They are also reflected in some additional topics that are discussed occasionally. Some analysts argue that NATO needs to pay more attention to **space** as a domain that is significant for military security. Stickings (2020), for example, argues that NATO's response to Russian and Chinese activities in space should not remain confined to designating space an »operational domain«. He calls especially for clarification of the distribution of responsibilities in space between NATO and its member states and a discussion of possible scenarios for incidents in space. Unal (2019) adds the **cyber** security of space-based assets as a topic to which NATO should pay attention. Some commentators call on NATO to generally put more effort in the resilience of systems vulnerable to cyber attacks, including critical networks and C3 systems (Besch 2018b; Afina et al. 2020).

Finally, British think tanks appear to look at the **regional** distribution of threats through a specifically Northern lens. While the concerns of Southern members about migration, terrorism and instability around the Mediterranean are occasionally mentioned, there are few concrete suggestions about what NATO as an organization could do about them. At best, NATO may help other nations to defend themselves and train forces in the MENA region (Besch/Bond 2018; Efstad/Tamnes 2019: 19; Olsen 2020) or support more robust peacekeeping in Libya once internal tensions with Turkey are resolved (Scazzieri 2021). In contrast, some commentators regard the North as a region in which NATO should step up its defence efforts. Russia has been active in the Arctic for a while, China has designated itself a »near-Arctic state« and the Arctic, or the Wider North (including the Baltic states), is of strategic importance for NATO because of its significance for trade and communication routes. Moreover, NATO is militarily vulnerable in the North through the »GIUK gap«. Given this situation, some commentators recommend that NATO (and the United Kingdom) pay more attention to the region (Kennedy-Pipe/Depledge 2019) and develop forc-

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