



# Who are Britain's most important allies and partners?

By *Dr William D. James*

Studies of British foreign and defence policy often draw on Lord Palmerston's maxim that the country has neither eternal allies, nor perpetual enemies, only eternal and perpetual interests.<sup>1</sup> While such thinking suited a policy of 'splendid isolation', it now appears outdated, given the relative position of the United Kingdom (UK) today as well as the strength, endurance, and utility of its alliances over the past century. Since the 1960s, it has been an ingrained assumption of British defence strategy that the UK would not undertake 'major operations' alone<sup>2</sup> – the Falklands being a notable exception (although the UK still drew heavily upon American materiel assistance to expel the invading Argentinian forces from the islands).<sup>3</sup>

A state's grand strategy is based on four 'tools' or components: armed force, wealth, allies, and public opinion.<sup>4</sup> Few states act alone. Even during its 'unipolar moment', the United States (US) worked in concert with allies. The UK

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Palmerston, Intervention in: Debate on Treaty Of Adrianople – Charges Against Viscount Palmerston, House of Commons, 01/03/1848, <https://api.parliament.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>2</sup> HM Government, *The Defence Review* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1966), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> William D. James, 'Influencing the United States: is the game worth the candle for junior allies?', *International Politics*, 59 (2022), p. 1039.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Howard, 'Grand Strategy in the Twentieth Century', *Defence Studies*, 1:1 (2001), p. 10.

is a major European power with global interests, so alliances are essential to securing its objectives. Through a blend of historical legacy and ingenuity, Britain is a central node in a worldwide network of alliances and partnerships, which provide it with ‘strategic advantage’ relative to its adversaries. Such arrangements help to ‘multiply’ British influence by aligning other countries in support of Britain’s interests and objectives.<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example, how the government mobilised British allies and partners in the wake of the Salisbury poisonings, leading to a mass expulsion of Russian diplomats from Copenhagen to Canberra.

States primarily form alliances to deter common threats.<sup>6</sup> It still largely holds true that ‘alliances are against, and only derivatively for, someone or something.’<sup>7</sup> Much is made of the emerging ‘axis’ between Russia, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), North Korea, and Iran. It is important, however, to remember the reach and depth of the alliance network between free and open countries, embodied through formal alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), forums such as the G7, and strategic arrangements such as AUKUS.

Thus, to amend Palmerston’s adage for this century, it is in the UK’s eternal and perpetual interest to preserve and cultivate advantageous alliances and partnerships. In 2016, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy urged the government to “‘game” hypothetical scenarios where the UK’s relationships with key allies and partners are called into conflict’ in order ‘to establish which aspects of the UK’s key relationships are the most important.’<sup>8</sup> More recently, a report by the Tony Blair Institute calls on the new government to ‘conduct a comprehensive stocktake and refresh of the state of the UK’s international alliances.’<sup>9</sup>

This Primer kickstarts that process: Who are the UK’s most important allies and partners today? Which security arrangements – from the Five Eyes intelligence group to the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) – are currently the most significant? Finally, how will these relationships evolve over the next decade? To

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<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Elefteriu, William Freer and James Rogers, ‘What is strategic advantage?’, *Council on Geostrategy*, 23/11/2023, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>6</sup> This is particularly true of NATO. See: Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> George Liska, *Nations in Alliances: The Limits of Interdependence* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> ‘First Report – National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015’, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 10/07/2016, <https://committees.parliament.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Macon-Cooney, Amalia Khachatryan, Melanie Garson, Jeegar Kakkad, Daniel Sleat, Jared Wright, Kevin Zandermann and Luke Stanley, ‘Reimagining Defence and Security: New Capabilities for New Challenges’, *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 11/06/2024, <https://www.institute.global/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

help answer these questions, the Council on Geostrategy surveyed over 100 practitioners and experts in British foreign, security, and defence policy on the relative importance of the UK's allies and partners. The Primer concludes with three observations concerning alliance management.

## *Methodology*

The survey was divided in two parts: 1. Bilateral alliances and partnerships; and 2. Mini/multilateral alliances and security arrangements. Participants were asked to interpret 'allies' and 'partners' broadly, including formal treaty allies and countries with which the UK enjoys informal security ties. They were first tasked with assessing the relative importance of the following states today: Australia, Canada, Estonia, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Norway, Poland, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Taiwan, Ukraine, and the US.<sup>10</sup> The respondents were then asked if their assessment of these alliances and partnerships would likely change by 2030 (scale: 'Far more important', 'more important', 'same', 'less important', 'far less important').

It is worth noting that this list of 15 states is not the entirety of the UK's alliances and partnerships, so respondents were also encouraged to highlight particularly significant actors not included in this list. Finally, participants were asked to assess the importance of the following mini/multilateral alliances and security arrangements both now and in 2030 (using the same scales as above): AUKUS, Five Eyes, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), the Group of Seven (G7), the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), and NATO.

Scores for each ally, partner, alliance or strategic arrangement in 2024 (see: Tables 1 and 3) were determined as: 'trivial' = 1, 'marginal' = 2, 'significant' = 3, 'crucial' = 4, or 'paramount' = 5. For the 2030 forecast (see: Tables 2 and 4), scores for each alliance or partnership were determined as: 'far more important = 2', 'more important = 1', 'same = 0', 'less important = -1', and 'far less important = -2'. The overall scores were calculated by adding the totals for each ally, partner, alliance or strategic arrangement for 2024, and then adding or subtracting for 2030. The total an ally, partner, alliance or strategic arrangement could receive is 510 in 2024 or 714 in 2030, with the minimums being 102 and -102, respectively.

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<sup>10</sup> This list of allies and partners was drawn up by James Rogers, Director of Research at the Council on Geostrategy, after a review of recent security and defence reviews and other government literature.

## Bilateral alliances and partnerships

The data shows that participants put their faith in institutionally strong alliances with fellow democratic states. Unsurprisingly, the US, the world’s largest economy and strongest military power, emerged as the UK’s foremost ally both now and in future. Over 90% of respondents consider it of ‘paramount’ importance today. The relationship, however, is often turbulent at the surface. Consider, for example, the difficulties arising from Donald Trump’s transactional

**Table 1: Most important allies and partners in 2024**

Rank	Score	Ally/Partner
1	499	United States
2	416	France
3	408	Ukraine
4	388	Australia
5	381	Poland
6	369	Germany
7	360	Japan
8	359	Norway
9	309	Italy
10	297	Canada
11	297	Estonia
12	294	India
13	289	Saudi Arabia
14	285	South Korea
15	272	Taiwan

approach or the fallout from Joe Biden’s chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. Yet the institutional undercurrents of the alliance, particularly in terms of nuclear, intelligence, and military cooperation, continue to flow smoothly. The 2023 Defence Command Paper (DCP) describes the relationship as ‘the broadest, deepest and most advanced of any two countries in the world.’<sup>11</sup> Despite the prospect of a second Trump term – and its resulting uncertainty – practitioners and experts expect the US to remain the UK’s most important ally in 2030. As Keir Starmer, Prime Minister, recently put it, it is an alliance which ‘transcends whoever fills the post of prime minister and president.’<sup>12</sup>

**France** is currently the UK’s second most important ally according to the survey data. At first glance, this might be surprising given the political tensions over Brexit and AUKUS. Yet, courtesy of the 2010 Lancaster House treaties, the British-French alliance has matured institutionally. Although not at the same level as the UK-US alliance, the bilateral military relationship is particularly close, following

the establishment of the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force of 10,000 troops and a surge in personnel exchanges. Cooperation even extends to the nuclear realm: through the Teutates project, the UK and France jointly operate a facility near Dijon for the maintenance of their nuclear weapon stockpiles. Such deep, bureaucratic collaboration will be vital if the current political instability in France

<sup>11</sup> ‘Defence Command Paper 2023: Defence’s response to a more contested and volatile world’, Ministry of Defence, 18/07/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>12</sup> William Booth and Karla Adam, ‘Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak clash in first UK election debate’, *The Washington Post*, 04/06/2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

endures. France is cited 18 times in the Integrated Review Refresh (IRR) – more than any other state bar Ukraine. Looking ahead, John Healey, Defence Secretary, intends to ‘reboot’ the Lancaster House treaties.<sup>13</sup>

Eight of the top ten allies in 2024 are democratic states in the Euro-Atlantic region (**Estonia** is also joint tenth with **Canada**), reflecting the importance – and current precarious state – of the European security environment. **Ukraine**, which is mentioned more than any other state in the IRR, is seen as the third most significant partner today in the survey. The UK is the third largest donor of bilateral assistance to Kyiv and has been the foremost champion of providing lethal aid to the embattled country.

Further west, British practitioners and experts evidently look favourably on **Poland’s** military modernisation plans with Warsaw regarded as the UK’s fifth most important ally both now and in 2030. Since 2022, 100 British troops have been stationed in Poland to defend its airspace using the Sky Sabre defence system. Meanwhile, UK-Poland defence industrial interests are coalescing around the Type 31 frigate, which will be in service with both navies by 2030. In 2022, Britain, Poland, and Ukraine signed a trilateral pact to advance cooperation across a range of issues, including cyber and energy security.<sup>14</sup> The IRR notes that ‘our bilateral ties with some European nations – such as Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states – are now closer than they have been at any point for decades.’<sup>15</sup>

The 2023 DCP states that **Italy** ‘is becoming a more significant partner for the UK’ – a view supported in the survey data.<sup>16</sup> Through the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), the British and Italians (with the Japanese) are co-developing a sixth-generation fighter jet. Most respondents view **Germany** as a ‘significant’ partner, although a sizeable minority regard it as ‘crucial’, but relatively few see it as ‘paramount’. During the recent election campaign, both the Conservative and Labour parties pledged to negotiate a new security treaty with Berlin, bringing it in line with the agreements with France (2010) and Poland (2018).<sup>17</sup> It is telling that David Lammy, the Foreign Secretary, visited the

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<sup>13</sup> John Healey cited in: ‘The UK Labour Party’s Foreign and Defense Priorities: A Conversation With David Lammy and John Healey’, *The Wilson Center*, 22/09/2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>14</sup> For more on this, see: Przemysław Biskup, James Rogers and Hanna Shelest, ‘The trilateral initiative: Rekindling relations between Britain, Poland and Ukraine’, *Council on Geostrategy*, 01/02/2023, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Integrated Review Refresh: Responding to a more contested and volatile world’, Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>16</sup> ‘Defence Command Paper 2023: Defence’s response to a more contested and volatile world’, Ministry of Defence, 18/07/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>17</sup> See: Cristina Gallardo, ‘UK Labour would seek security and defence treaty with Germany’, *Politico*, 16/05/2023, <https://www.politico.eu/> (checked: 12/07/2024) and ‘Conservative Party Manifesto 2024’, *Conservatives*, 06/2024, <https://manifesto.conservatives.com/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

German capital on his first trip as foreign secretary (followed by Poland and Sweden).

**Norway**, which has longstanding ties to the UK, and **Estonia** both make it into the top 10, reflecting their geostrategic importance to NATO and military ties with the British armed forces. Norway hosts an Arctic operations base for the Royal Marines and shares concerns about the threat from the Russian fleet in the high-north, while the British lead a multinational battlegroup in Estonia as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. Estonia may not be a large ally, but it is potentially the first Britain would need to defend should Russia ever attack NATO.

**Australia**, which is cited nine times in the IRR, is seen as an increasingly important partner to British practitioners and experts. The two countries share historical ties but have sought to institutionalise the relationship in recent years through security and defence agreements (2013 and 2024), regular ministerial dialogues, military exercises, a trade agreement, and AUKUS. Not only will the two countries procure common nuclear powered submarines utilising US technology, but the agreement allows basing access for British assets in the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, Pillar II, which covers a range of advanced technologies from quantum to hypersonics, effectively melds the defence-industrial bases of the three partners together. Based on the survey results, Australia is set to become the UK's second most important ally by 2030, reflecting a strong degree of faith among the British security community about AUKUS' trajectory.

UK-Japan ties have deepened considerably over the past decade and Tokyo is now seen as a significant, if not crucial, ally. Following a spate of ministerial dialogues and military exercises, the two governments signed a defence agreement in January 2023. The treaty allows the UK and Japan to deploy forces in one another's countries. Several months later, the two parties signed the Hiroshima Accord, 'an ambitious pathway to enhance bilateral cooperation in areas of the economy, resilience, and security', including mutual consultation in the event of an emergency.<sup>18</sup> According to the survey, British practitioners and experts expect the relationship to flower over the next six years. Rumours abound that Japan may even participate in Pillar II of AUKUS.<sup>19</sup> Regardless, the survey suggests that Tokyo will be one of the UK's top five allies by 2030.

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<sup>18</sup> Alessio Patalano, 'Middle Powers: don't write off Britain and Japan', *Engelsberg Ideas*, 19/05/2023, <https://engelsbergideas.com/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>19</sup> William Reynolds, 'Japan, AUKUS and the future of Western defence', *Engelsberg Ideas*, 10/04/2024, <https://engelsbergideas.com/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

**Table 2: Most important allies and partners in 2030**

Δ	Rank	Score	Increase on 2024	Ally/Partner
-	1	539	40	United States
▲2	2	501	113	Australia
▼1	3	462	46	France
▲3	4	456	96	Japan
-	5	452	71	Poland
▼3	6	441	33	Ukraine
▼1	7	421	52	Germany
-	8	392	33	Norway
▲3	9	366	72	India
▲1	10	335	38	Estonia
▲3	11	331	46	South Korea
▼3	12	324	15	Italy
▲2	13	323	51	Taiwan
▼4	14	320	23	Canada
▼2	15	296	7	Saudi Arabia

Japan’s projected ascendancy in the rankings aligns with broader expectations for Indo-Pacific countries. Respondents forecasted that the UK’s relationships with **India, South Korea, and Taiwan** would become more significant by 2030. This is in keeping with the IRR’s promise to put ‘our approach to the Indo-Pacific on a long term strategic footing, making the region a permanent pillar of the UK’s international policy.’<sup>20</sup> This view enjoys cross-party support with Lammy recently pledging to deepen the existing security arrangements with Japan and South Korea.<sup>21</sup> Critically, none of the alliances or arrangements

were seen by British legislators, practitioners, and experts as *less* important in 2030. While several allies in Europe drop in the rankings, this does not mean that respondents envisage these relationships to worsen in absolute terms. Rather, they think that certain allies will assume more importance in relative terms. This is to be expected given the shift in the geopolitical and economic centre of gravity to the Indo-Pacific. Thus, Australia and Japan are the primary beneficiaries. Italy’s descent by three spots is rather surprising given GCAP, but this may be a slight outlier. Indeed, the data suggests this is not statistically significant, as Rome comes within nine points of tenth place.

Finally, respondents proffered other allies not included in the survey for consideration. Over a quarter pointed to British allies in northern Europe, notably

<sup>20</sup> See: ‘Integrated Review Refresh: Responding to a more contested and volatile world’, Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>21</sup> David Lammy, ‘The Case for Progressive Realism: Why Britain Must Chart a New Global Course’, *Foreign Affairs*, 05-06/2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

**Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands.** In 2022, the UK pledged to aid Stockholm and Helsinki if either were attacked while their bids to join NATO were being processed.<sup>22</sup> The Netherlands, meanwhile, shares a similar strategic culture to the UK, emphasising maritime and amphibious capabilities. A Dutch warship joined the Royal Navy's carrier deployment to the Indo-Pacific in 2021.

Several partners in the Indo-Pacific were also highlighted, including **New Zealand, Oman, and Singapore.** All three have deep historic ties to the UK. New Zealand is part of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, while Oman and Singapore host British naval and logistics facilities.

## Mini/multilateral alliances and security pacts

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Beyond its bilateral partnerships, the UK is a member of numerous multilateral alliances, security arrangements, and minilateral groupings.<sup>23</sup> Given the war on its doorstep in Ukraine, it is unsurprising that British legislators, practitioners, and experts regard **NATO** as the most important multilateral alliance both now and for the foreseeable future. The IRR refers to NATO as 'the bedrock of our security' and this is clearly supported by the survey data.<sup>24</sup> Prior to winning power, Labour's shadow ministerial team consistently heralded the alliance and made an 'unshakeable commitment' to it in their manifesto.<sup>25</sup> Channelling Ernest Bevin, who was instrumental in the founding of the alliance in 1949, Healey and Lammy have since pledged to implement a 'NATO first' defence strategy – underscoring its centrality to Labour's thinking.<sup>26</sup>

The **Five Eyes** – and associated arrangements in other areas – brings together the intelligence agencies of the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This grouping dates back to the end of the Second World War. Traditionally secretive, the arrangement has come out of the shadows in recent years – with several keynote speeches by the directors of the intelligence agencies. The DCP states that the partnership 'exemplifies the deep trust, mutual

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<sup>22</sup> See: Alexander Lanoszka and James Rogers, "'Global Britain" extends to Northern Europe', *Britain's World*, 12/05/2022, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>23</sup> Minilateral arrangements allow small groups of states to cooperate on specific issues of shared interest outside of formal institutional structures which can quickly impede decision-making and implementation. Prime examples include AUKUS and the JEF.

<sup>24</sup> 'Integrated Review Refresh: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>25</sup> 'Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024', Labour, 06/2024, <https://labour.org.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>26</sup> David Lammy and John Healey, 'This Labour Government will have a "Nato first" defence strategy', *The Telegraph*, 08/07/2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).



**Table 3: Most important mini/multilateral alliances and security arrangements in 2024**

Rank	Score	Alliance/Security Arrangement
1	501	NATO
2	471	Five Eyes
3	392	AUKUS
4	365	JEF
5	337	G7
6	290	FPDA

commitment and shared values of the five states’ and suggests there is scope for broader cooperation beyond intelligence sharing.<sup>27</sup>

Accordingly, survey participants expect the grouping to remain a key security arrangement well into the future.

**AUKUS** is seen by British legislators, practitioners, and experts as the country’s third most important security arrangement. Given that the pact is still in its infancy,

relative to NATO or the Five Eyes, this is a testament to its extraordinary potential. Labour’s ministerial team repeatedly emphasise their commitment to AUKUS, having previously distanced themselves from the prior government’s language of ‘Global Britain’ and the Indo-Pacific ‘tilt.’ Beyond the strategic rationale, there is also a clear domestic political incentive. Labour won several constituencies in the 2024 election which are integral to the UK’s defence industrial base and its defence pacts in the Indo-Pacific, including Barrow-in-Furness (AUKUS Pillar I), and Filton and Bradley Stoke (GCAP).

The **Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)** is effectively a sub-grouping within NATO, bringing together the Nordic countries (including Iceland), the Baltic states, and the Netherlands – with the UK serving as the framework nation. The allies conduct maritime exercises in the High North, North Atlantic, and Baltic Sea regions, deterring Russian aggression and facilitating greater interoperability.<sup>28</sup>

According to the IRR, the **Group of Seven (G7)** is of ‘growing importance’ to the UK – unsurprising given how it has acted as an advocacy coalition for Ukraine. Like the Five Eyes and AUKUS, the forum is considered an ‘Atlantic-Pacific partnership’ in that it provides a vehicle for like-minded partners with shared interests that transcend regional concerns.<sup>29</sup> In recent years, the group cooperated on a diverse range of issues from economic sanctions to human security challenges such as pandemic preparedness.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Defence Command Paper 2023: Defence’s response to a more contested and volatile world’, Ministry of Defence, 18/07/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>28</sup> Sean Monaghan, ‘The Joint Expeditionary Force: Global Britain in Northern Europe?’, *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 25/03/2022, <https://www.csis.org/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Integrated Review Refresh: Responding to a more contested and volatile world’, Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked:12/07/2024).

**Table 4: Most important mini/multilateral alliances and security arrangements in 2030**

Δ	Rank	Score	Increase on 2024	Alliance/Security arrangement
-	1	569	68	NATO
-	2	526	55	Five Eyes
-	3	503	111	AUKUS
-	4	411	46	JEF
-	5	354	17	G7
-	6	312	22	FPDA

The FPDA between the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Malaysia was signed in 1971, following the UK's drawdown from its 'East of Suez' posture.<sup>30</sup> Originally intended to deter Indonesia (following the *Konfrontasi* or Confrontation), smooth Singaporean-Malaysian relations, and bolster the military capabilities of Singapore and Malaysia, the

FPDA has been hailed as 'the quiet achiever.'<sup>31</sup> Today, the five partners regularly participate in joint military exercises and agree to consult each other in the event of external aggression against Singapore or Malaysia.

The British legislators, practitioners, and experts surveyed did not foresee much change in the relative importance of these mini/multilateral alliances and security arrangements over the next decade, although the raw data suggests that AUKUS will become more prominent in Britain's alliance portfolio. As noted above, it should be emphasised that these six examples do not constitute the entirety of the UK's mini/multilateral alliances and security arrangements. Several participants flagged GCAP and the E3 (Britain, France, and Germany) as key examples. Labour endorsed GCAP with John Healey, the Defence Secretary, likening the agreement to AUKUS – as a means of strengthening 'peace, stability, and deterrence' in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, roughly 10% of respondents expect the UK to have a closer relationship with the European Union (EU) on security and defence by 2030. This is something that the Conservative government edged towards in the wake of the tortuous Brexit negotiations; the IRR refers to cooperation with the EU on defence through the framework of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) –

<sup>30</sup> William D. James, *British Grand Strategy in the Age of American Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 104-145.

<sup>31</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements: The Quiet Achiever', *Security Challenges*, 3:1 (2007), pp. 79-96.

<sup>32</sup> John Healey quoted in: 'Global Combat Air Programme Treaty', Hansard, 18/12/2023, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

a series of defence collaboration frameworks between EU members. The new Labour government is already working on a UK-EU security pact.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

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This Primer has examined the current state and future trajectory of the UK's alliances and partnerships. The relationship with the US continues to be of paramount importance, while key Euro-Atlantic allies, notably France and Poland, are regarded as crucial. Ukraine, meanwhile, is seen as a vital partner. The UK's military assistance to Kyiv, which enjoys cross-party and public support, will be increasingly consequential if key allies look inwards amid domestic political upheaval. Over the coming years, Indo-Pacific partners, particularly Australia and Japan, will likely assume an even more prominent place in British thinking. Similarly, 'Atlantic-Pacific partnerships' such as AUKUS and Five Eyes will become more significant. This will not come at the expense of NATO, however, which will remain the foundation of the UK's security. Collectively, these arrangements offer Britain 'strategic advantage' relative to its adversaries, helping to deter threats in geopolitical theatres that HM Government deems critical. This paper concludes with three further observations as the Strategic Defence Review gets underway.

### *Observations for alliance management*

#### **1. Institutionally robust alliances are the most significant**

The survey suggests that legislators, practitioners, and experts favour institutionally strong alliances. The relationships with the US and France, and increasingly Australia, are buttressed by regular ministerial dialogues, personnel exchanges, military exercises, and defence-industrial cooperation – all of which serve as the rocks upon which the waves of domestic and international crises break. Similarly, the three most important mini/multilateral agreements – NATO, the Five Eyes, and AUKUS – are all sustained by regular interactions between the relevant agencies, departments, and services.

Institutionally robust alliances not only guard against turbulence at the political level, but they also enhance trust between British officials and their

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion on what this pact may achieve, see: Ed Arnold and Richard G Whitman, 'What Can the New Government's Proposed UK-EU Security Pact Achieve?', *Royal United Services Institute*, 08/07/2024, <https://rusi.org/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

allied counterparts over time. The UK-US intelligence relationship is a prime example of this. When the US National Security Agency's main Signals Intelligence Computer at Fort Meade went down for four days in 2000, the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) plugged the gaps. The following year, on 12th September, when the US was still reeling from the terrorist attacks on its eastern seaboard, only one plane was permitted to enter US airspace. This carried the chiefs of Britain's intelligence agencies.<sup>34</sup> Both examples illustrate a high degree of trust between officials, courtesy of longstanding institutional cooperation. Thus, if practitioners wish to strengthen a particular alliance, forging or solidifying the institutional bonds between bureaucracies is key.

## 2. Alliances are weakened by 'free riders' – capability matters

Bilateral alliances are reliant on both parties honouring their end of the bargain. As the example above demonstrates, the UK-US intelligence alliance works so well because both sides value the quality of each other's agencies. Similarly, a multilateral military alliance such as NATO depends on all sides pulling their weight in terms of investment and capabilities. A failure to do so results in complaints about burden sharing. American concerns over European 'free riding' date back to NATO's founding.<sup>35</sup>

Today, the British military's state of readiness is under intense scrutiny.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Labour's inheritance is unenviable. Allies and partners are concerned about the UK's ability to honour its global commitments, given that successive governments have 'hollowed out' the armed forces.<sup>37</sup> Analysts from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, for example, are already calling on the new British government to 'promptly and publicly reaffirm the UK's commitment to a persistent forward defence presence in the Indo-Pacific', amid concerns about Britain's overstretched armed forces. Notably, the previous government's pledge

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<sup>34</sup> Both examples are cited in: Michael Smith, *The Real Special Relationship: The True Story of How the British and US Secret Services Work Together* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2022), p. 5 and p. 447.

<sup>35</sup> William Freer, 'The cost to NATO of skimping on defence', *Britain's World*, 09/07/2024, <https://www.britainsworld.org.uk/> (checked:12/07/2024).

<sup>36</sup> See: Rob Johnson quoted in: Helen Warrell and John Paul Rathbone, 'UK military unprepared for "conflict of any scale", warns ex-defence official', *Financial Times*, 01/07/2024, <https://www.ft.com/> (checked:12/07/2024) and Matthew Savill, 'A Hollow Force? Choices for the UK Armed Forces', *Royal United Services Institute*, 08/07/2024, <https://rusi.org/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>37</sup> Ben Wallace quoted in: George Grylls, "'Hollowed-out' UK military can't send a division to war', *The Times*, 23/01/2023, <https://www.thetimes.com/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

to rotate one of the Royal Navy's seven Astute class nuclear submarines through Western Australia from 2027 is considered 'integral to AUKUS.'<sup>38</sup>

The UK is certainly not the only state wrestling with resource dilemmas and it is by no means a 'free rider.' Yet it is imperative that HM Government increases defence spending to strengthen Britain's ability to lead in the alliances and strategic arrangements to which it is committed. Implementing AUKUS and a 'NATO first' defence strategy will necessitate further investment. Providing industry with that surety would also foster a more resilient industrial base that could reconstitute capabilities quickly in the dire event of conflict with a peer competitor.

Talk of raising defence spending to 2.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2030, or when circumstances allow, is insufficient at best. HM Government should instead be at 2.5% in 2025 and the conversation reframed to how it affords 3% by 2030.<sup>39</sup> Defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP is not a perfect measure, and loosening the purse strings is, of course, only part of the solution to the Ministry of Defence's difficulties (the British Army, for example, struggles to articulate a clear role).<sup>40</sup> Yet there is little doubt that additional funding to improve the offer to service personnel (addressing recruitment and retention issues) and bolster the size of the RAF and the Royal Navy is urgently required.

Alliances depend on the careful management of expectations. If allies and partners believe HM Government lacks the military means to honour its commitments, they may look elsewhere for support – with grave consequences for accruing influence and, in turn, achieving national objectives.

### ***3. Alliances and partnerships should remain unsentimental***

Alliances typically form or intensify when states sense a common threat. Consider, for example, the resumption of US-UK nuclear cooperation during the Cold War. It took the shock of the Sputnik satellite launch in 1957 – and the danger posed by the Soviet Union's technological advances – to convince an anxious US administration that it needed nuclear-armed allies. The fact that HM Government had successfully tested two thermonuclear bombs in 1957 and 1958 (and via airdrop) – thereby demonstrating again the importance of *capability* –

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<sup>38</sup> Alex Bristow (ed.), 'Full tilt: The UK's defence role in the Pacific: Views from The Strategist', *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 07/2024, <https://www.aspi.org.au/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>39</sup> The Council on Geostrategy recently launched a campaign calling on the government 'to invest in real terms at least 2.5% of GDP on defence in each year' of this Parliament 'with a longer-term commitment to reach 3% by 2030'. See: 'Defence Investment Campaign', *Council on Geostrategy*, 02/04/2024, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>40</sup> William D. James, 'What is the British Army for?', *Engelsberg Ideas*, 08/03/2023, <https://engelsbergideas.com/> (checked: 12/07/2024).



enhanced the UK's appeal as a partner.<sup>41</sup> In short, the UK-US nuclear alliance did not stem from American charity but the US national interest.

According to the survey data, all 15 alliances will become more important in absolute terms by 2030. The UK is indeed dependent on its alliances and partnerships to secure 'strategic advantage' to multiply its influence. Yet it is vital for practitioners to remember that such arrangements are not an objective in themselves but rather a means to an end, such as greater security or increased prosperity. Otherwise, they may come to view an ally's interests as synonymous with their own.

Britain often sees its alliances and partnerships through rose tinted spectacles. Political leaders occasionally refer to allies as 'friends', but this can lead to a misalignment of expectations.<sup>42</sup> This is particularly true of the UK-US relationship. In the build-up to the 2003 Iraq War, the British Ambassador to Washington told his superiors in London that, 'the Americans are very good at compartmentalising their sentimental and sincere affection for Britain from the single minded pursuit of national interest. It is a gap we have to close.'<sup>43</sup> His advice still holds for contemporary alliance politics. The strongest alliances rest on a bedrock of shared interests, not sentiments.

*This Primer is part of the Council on Geostrategy's **Strategic Advantage Cell**.*

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<sup>41</sup> Matthew Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent, Volume I: From the V-Bomber Era to the Arrival of Polaris, 1945-1964* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 100-101.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Porter and Joshua Shifrinson, 'Why We Can't Be Friends with Our Allies', *Politico*, 22/10/2020, <https://www.politico.com/> (checked: 12/07/2024).

<sup>43</sup> See Section 3.1, Point 177 of Volume 1 of the Iraq Inquiry. See: 'The Iraq Inquiry', The National Archives, 06/07/2016, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> (checked: 12/07/2024).



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