



The Strategic Defence Review, Britain and sea power

By Dr Emma Salisbury and James Rogers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Similarly to the previous administration, the new Labour government has pledged to embrace a ‘North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-first’ defence posture. A Strategic Defence Review is now underway to reappraise and determine the shape of the United Kingdom’s (UK) future defences.
- Given British dependence on the sea for economic growth and prosperity, as well as the Net Zero agenda, the sea power remains central to the national effort. Britain is situated at the centre of the Euro-Atlantic world, a perspective it should embrace and promote.
- As it looks to boost investment in defence to 2.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and move towards greater integration between the armed forces, the new government should place sea power at the heart of its agenda. The Council on Geostrategy is delighted to aid such thinking with the founding of its Sea Power Laboratory.



A new government provides a chance for a fresh look at the problems facing the United Kingdom (UK). Building on the work of previous administrations to defend the nation and ensure national prosperity, the focus of Keir Starmer, the new Prime Minister, on mission-driven government, invites us to think about how Britain can enhance economic growth and reduce dependencies on other countries, especially energy, in an increasingly volatile world. The UK is, at its heart, a state built on sea power – and sea power will be critical to the delivery of the new administration’s ambitions for the British people.

The UK relies on the sea for security, energy, trade, and prosperity. Central to that is the Royal Navy, the senior service of the British Armed Forces, collaborating with other national services to ensure the defence of the homeland, as well as safeguarding British interests from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. But sea power is not only naval power; it also encompasses a country’s ability to project and further its political and economic interests by sea.

The demand on the Royal Navy’s resources is steadily increasing, a trend which looks unlikely to cease in the coming decades. The geopolitical challenge posed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Russia, Iran and North Korea – the so-called ‘CRINK’¹ – and the threat posed by non-state actors, such as the Houthis, leads to the Royal Navy being asked to do more and more. As geopolitical uncertainty intensifies, the threat to the connections which keep the British economy going – from maritime communication lines and subsea cables, to energy pipelines and offshore wind farms – continues to grow.²

As His Majesty’s (HM) Government pushes forward with the Strategic Defence Review, this Primer identifies the centrality of sea power to Britain’s wellbeing and prosperity through to the middle of the 21st century. With this in mind, it also explains why the Council on Geostrategy is establishing a new research and engagement programme – the Sea Power Laboratory – to identify how the UK will continue to be shaped by the maritime environment.

Britain as a modern sea power

The Royal Navy may no longer have in its order of battle an impressive fleet of Men O’ War or Dreadnought battleships, but it remains one of the world’s leading navies. The modern navy has four nuclear ballistic missile submarines, two large

¹ For more on the CRINK, see: James Rogers, ‘Rise of the CRINK?’, *Britain’s World*, 24/10/2024, <https://www.britainsworld.org.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024) and Ben Coxon, ‘The CRINK: A strategic threat?’, *Britain’s World*, 25/10/2024, <https://www.britainsworld.org.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

² The 2022 attacks on the Nord Stream pipeline highlighted these vulnerabilities. See: Louisa Brooke-Holland, ‘Seabed warfare: Protecting the UK’s undersea infrastructure’, House of Commons Library, 24/05/2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

aircraft carriers, six destroyers, 11 frigates, seven nuclear attack submarines, two amphibious assault vessels and a plethora of patrol, mine hunting, survey and auxiliary vessels. Alongside several naval facilities – including Gibraltar, Mare Harbour in the Falklands, Duqm in Oman, Juffair in Bahrain, Diego Garcia, and Sembawang in Singapore – these vessels allow HM Government to project British influence around the world. The Royal Navy can deter and coerce – or destroy – opponents at sea, in the air and on the land, maintain a persistent or even permanent presence, convene and align allies and partners behind British interests, and deliver humanitarian assistance in times of emergency.

Behind this fleet sits Britain's national power base. The British economy is the sixth largest in the world in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as well as among the most sophisticated – ranking eighth globally for economic complexity.³ By international standards, the UK has an effective and transparent system of central administration, which has the means to raise and manage a considerable tax base. This allows Britain to maintain a modest but technologically powerful marine industrial base, with the capacity to design and manufacture highly advanced vessels, sensors and weapons systems.

The evolution of sea power in recent British strategy

Over the last decade, British defence reviews have underscored the critical importance of sea power in addressing contemporary security challenges and asserting the nation's global influence. These documents reflect a strategic recalibration in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics, emerging threats, and the imperative of maintaining maritime superiority.

The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review marked a significant point in this evolution.⁴ It emphasised the need for a capable and adaptable Royal Navy to respond to a complex security environment. The review highlighted the importance of maintaining a balanced maritime force, reinforcing the UK's ability to project power around the world. Not only did it commit to introducing both Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers, but also to a concept study to develop a new class of lighter general purpose frigate – allowing more to be procured by the 2030s.

In the 2021 Integrated Review, the UK reaffirmed its maritime strategy as central to its defence posture.⁵ The review articulated a vision for 'Global Britain', positioning the Royal Navy as a vital instrument in enhancing national security and international engagement. While the review concluded that the

³ See: 'Gross Domestic Product, current prices', International Monetary Fund, 10/2024, <https://www.imf.org/> (checked: 03/11/2024) and 'The Atlas of Economic Complexity', Harvard Growth Lab, 2021, <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

⁴ 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015', HM Government, 23/11/2015, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

⁵ 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age, the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', Cabinet Office, 16/03/2021, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).



Euro-Atlantic would remain central to Britain's posture, the emphasis on sea power was evident in the call for a more active role in the Indo-Pacific region. The resulting 'tilt' demonstrated a clear understanding that modern challenges, such as rising tensions in the South China Sea and the need to secure vital trade routes, necessitate a strong naval presence. The deployment of the Carrier Strike Group later that year was designed to showcase the UK's 'ability to project cutting-edge military power in support of NATO and international maritime security.' It challenged illegitimate Russian claims in the Black Sea, struck Daesh in Syria, and upheld freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Accompanying the first Integrated Review was the Defence Command Paper, which laid out specific commitments to bolster naval capabilities.⁶ This included plans to increase the number of ships, modernise existing fleets, and invest in advanced technologies. The UK pledged to enhance its surface and submarine capabilities, highlighting the role of submarines in maintaining strategic deterrence. This reflects an understanding of the multifaceted nature of sea power, extending beyond traditional surface operations to encompass undersea warfare and emerging cross-domain technologies.

The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh built on this, recognising that a more volatile world necessitated a commitment to a resilient Britain with the ability to 'deter, defend and compete' across all domains.⁷ With the advent of AUKUS in September 2021, the refresh looked to do away with the false distinction between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, preferring to see them as a single integrated theatre.

The recent reviews have also recognised the significance of international partnerships in strengthening maritime security, particularly British participation in naval exercises with allies to reinforce collective security. These collaborations illustrate the UK's commitment to maritime cooperation, demonstrating that sea power is not solely about national assets, but also about building coalitions to address shared security concerns.

Furthermore, both defence reviews have increasingly acknowledged the impact of emerging technologies on maritime warfare. The integration of cyber capabilities, uncrewed systems, and artificial intelligence – and their systematisation – into naval operations has been a focal point, indicating a recognition that future conflicts will be heavily influenced by emerging technological advancements. This adaptability is crucial for maintaining a competitive sea power edge in an era characterised by rapid change.

Policymakers have consistently highlighted the pivotal role of sea power in the nation's security strategy over recent years. For all the Royal Navy's

⁶ 'Defence in a Competitive Age', Ministry of Defence, 22/03/2021, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

⁷ 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

leadership and capability, however, it is clear that the fleet of the 2020s is too small for the growing challenges and threats the nation faces.⁸ While the country has access to a broad range of sophisticated maritime capabilities, it lacks the mass needed to maintain a broad global presence, as well as to keep up with the growing threats born of intensifying geopolitical competition.

Unless the ongoing Strategic Defence Review, to be delivered in early 2025, tackles these challenges, it is hard to see how HM Government will be able to protect, let alone promote, British interests. As geopolitical landscapes continue to shift, the UK's emphasis on sea power remains essential for safeguarding the nation's interests and projecting influence in an interconnected world.

Sea power to deliver national success

Both economic growth and national security require sea power to deliver long-term success. The resilience of the UK's economic connections, the security of home waters and the promotion and protection of British interests around the world are all maintained and enhanced by sea power.

Sea power and clean economic growth

For an island nation such as the UK, the sea is a critical lifeline for the economy. Even with the advent of aviation and the Channel Tunnel, around 95% of British trade by volume is still transported by sea.⁹ Britain relies heavily on secure maritime communication lines to facilitate international commerce – a robust naval presence ensures the protection of these routes from potential disruptions, such as pirates and geopolitical aggressors. The Houthis have shown how easy it is to disrupt shipping in the Red Sea and adjacent waters, at significant additional cost to commercial shipping and insurance – and thus the British consumer.¹⁰

The sea is also becoming increasingly important to deliver on Net Zero commitments. After a construction bonanza over the past decade, the UK now has more offshore wind farms and generating capacity than any country other than the PRC; these farms are linked to the national grid via subsea

⁸ See: “‘We’re going to need a bigger Navy’”, Defence Committee, House of Commons, 14/12/2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024) and William Freer and James Rogers, ‘Why Britain needs a larger navy’, Council on Geostrategy, 16/01/2024, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

⁹ ‘Embracing the ocean: a Board of Trade paper’, Department for Business and Trade, 10/03/2022, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

¹⁰ See: ‘UK and international response to Houthis in the Red Sea 2024’, House of Commons Library, 30/07/2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).



infrastructure, especially underwater cables.¹¹ In addition, undersea fibre optic cables are vital for communication – they deliver around 99% of the world’s communications.¹² For a service-based economy such as the UK with one of the world’s leading financial centres, their unimpeded operation is critical. These cables face increasing threats from state and non-state actors, including cyberattacks and sabotage at sea. Sea power is vital for their protection.

Finally, without sufficient sea power, it is hard to envisage how Net Zero and economic growth can be delivered. Indeed, the maritime sector can even contribute to that growth. HM Government has already determined through the ‘Refresh to the National Shipbuilding Strategy’ that the naval shipbuilding sector is of growing importance to the British economy, particularly in terms of spreading prosperity to coastal towns in Northern England and Scotland and in generating next-generation technologies.¹³ Investment in a stronger Royal Navy would provide surveillance, deterrence and rapid response capabilities to safeguard these infrastructures, or to strike those who seek to disrupt them. By ensuring the safety of undersea networks, the UK not only protects its economic interests but also maintains national security. And by acting as a centre of gravity for allies and partners in the maritime sector, HM Government increases the likelihood that they will buy British designed or manufactured vessels.

Sea power and national security

A NATO-FIRST APPROACH

Just as the previous Conservative government sought for Britain ‘to be the leading European Ally within NATO’, the new Labour government has committed to a ‘NATO-first approach’ to British security.¹⁴ As Box 1 shows, given the threat from Russia, a NATO-first approach is crucial to upholding collective defence. As a cornerstone of NATO’s deterrence posture, including as the custodian of the UK’s continuous at-sea deterrent, the Royal Navy plays a vital role in maintaining the alliance’s credibility and operational effectiveness.

¹¹ ‘Global Offshore Wind Report’, World Forum Offshore Wind, 04/2024, <https://wfo-global.org/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

¹² Alessio Patalano, ‘Unseen but vital: Britain and undersea security’, *Britain’s World*, 08/03/2023, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

¹³ ‘Refresh to the National Shipbuilding Strategy’, Ministry of Defence, 10/03/2024, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

¹⁴ See: ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age, the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy’, Cabinet Office, 16/03/2021, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024) and ‘This government will have a “NATO first” defence strategy: article by the Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary’, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Ministry of Defence, 09/07/2024, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).



Box 1: Facing Russian aggression

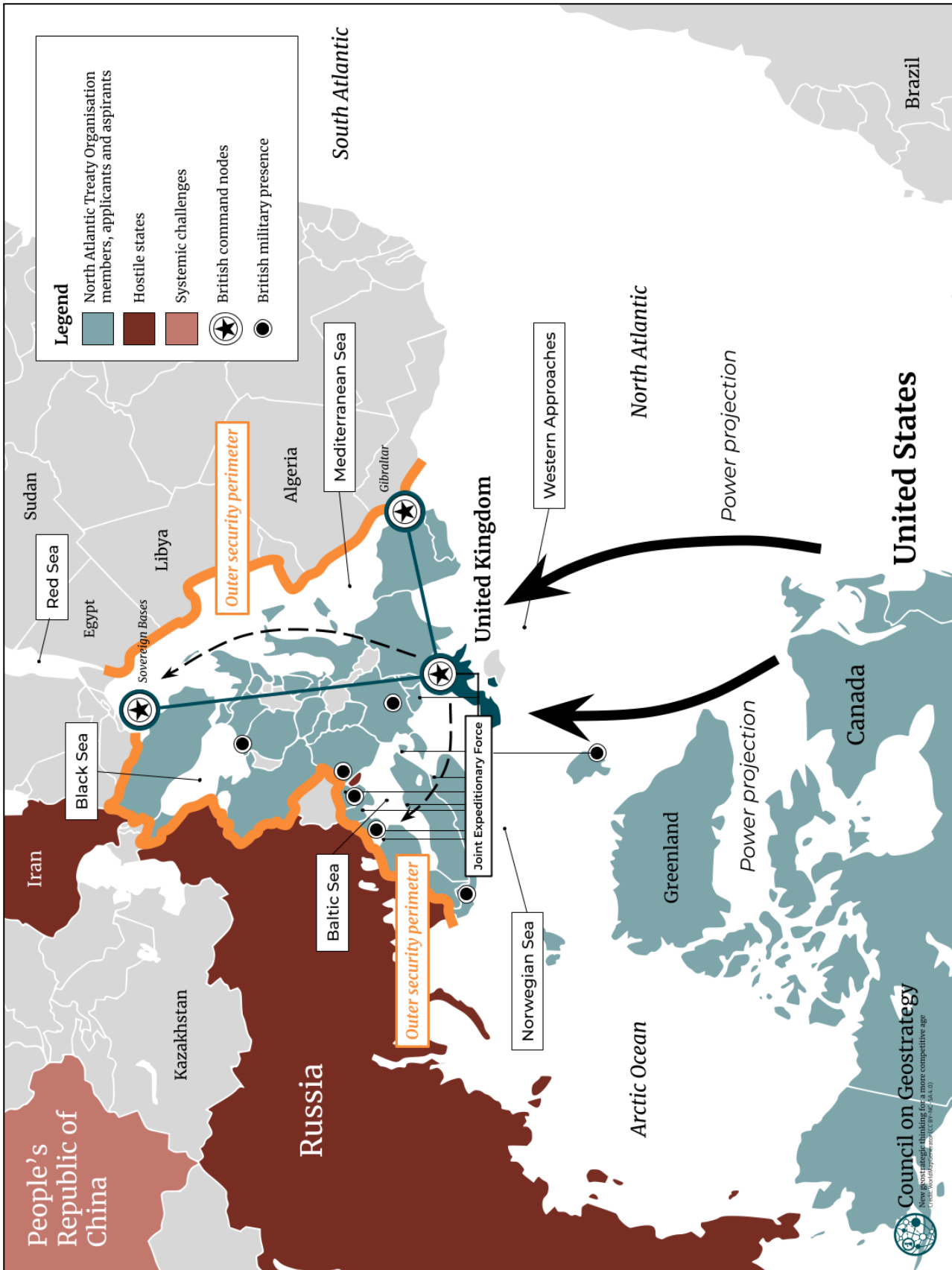
Tackling threats from Russia in the Atlantic is increasingly urgent in light of the evolving security landscape. In addition to its war of conquest in Ukraine, Russia's assertive military posture elsewhere, including aggressive actions in the Baltic Sea and Arctic regions, necessitates a determined maritime response from the UK. While Russia's land and air forces have been tied up and degraded in Ukraine, the Russian Navy remains largely unscathed (with the exception of the Black Sea Fleet, which has been fired on by Ukraine and remains bottled up due to the closure of the Turkish straits to warships). This leaves a significant number of other Russian naval assets available, including most of the submarine fleet, to cause problems for NATO in other waters.

The UK's ability to project naval strength and conduct anti-access/area denial operations is paramount to countering Russia's naval capabilities. This includes monitoring and deterring Russian submarine activity, which poses significant risks to transatlantic trade and European security. Investment in advanced maritime technologies, such as submarines and maritime patrol aircraft, enhances the Royal Navy's capability to deter provocations or respond effectively to any incursion.

Moreover, it is often forgotten that NATO's strategic geography is *fundamentally maritime*. As Map 1 shows, the ocean is central to the alliance, and Britain is positioned right in the middle – with further reach into the Mediterranean through Gibraltar and the Sovereign Bases on Cyprus. NATO's ability to project power across the North Atlantic and into Eastern Europe hinges on the ability of allied navies to exert sea control and facilitate rapid troop and equipment deployments, something which the Royal Navy would be expected to do in the event of hostilities. With rising tensions in the Baltic and the Arctic, as well as increased Russian naval activity in the North Atlantic, the UK's maritime capabilities are essential for ensuring deterrence and stability in these regions.¹⁵

Sea power enhances the UK's position in multinational operations, allowing for effective contributions to humanitarian missions, counter-piracy efforts, and crisis responses. As NATO adapts to emerging challenges, including cyber threats and hybrid warfare, a strong naval force is indispensable for maintaining operational flexibility and ensuring the alliance's strategic objectives are met. In this context, prioritising sea power is not just beneficial but essential for a NATO-first security strategy.

¹⁵ Heather Mongilio, 'Russia's Arctic Rise', *USNI News*, 29/10/2024, <https://news.usni.org/> (checked: 03/11/2024).



MAP 1: THE STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHY OF THE EURO-ATLANTIC ORDER

PARTNERSHIPS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The UK's need for sea power to address the systemic challenge posed by the PRC is increasingly critical as Beijing asserts its influence across the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. The PRC's expanding naval capabilities and its aggressive territorial claims in the South China Sea pose significant challenges to global security and freedom of navigation.¹⁶ The massive and sustained buildup of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), complemented by the growth in the Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia, is such that the PRC may emerge as the strongest navy in the Indo-Pacific by the 2030s.

Only a coalition of like-minded countries can challenge a power such as the PRC. Sea power enables Britain to participate in joint naval exercises and operations, strengthening partnerships with countries such as the United States (US), Japan, South Korea, and Australia, as well as investing in projects such as AUKUS to enhance regional security. This collaborative approach is crucial in deterring Chinese aggression, upholding a free and open international order, and reinforcing the principles of freedom of navigation.

INTEGRATING THE FORCE AROUND SEA POWER

The ongoing Strategic Defence Review is being structured on the government's commitment to raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by the end of this Parliament. Based on the previous government's assumptions, this would amount to approximately £22.5 billion more per year for defence by 2030.¹⁷ Given the intensification of geopolitical competition, this money should be spent as efficiently and as wisely as possible. This means it makes no sense for HM Government to duplicate efforts being taken by key European NATO allies, such as Poland, Germany and the Nordic and Baltic states. These allies have underway substantial land-based military modernisation programmes of their own; Poland alone has ordered over 1,000 South Korean K2 main battle tanks, while Germany plans to invest over €100 billion (£84 billion) into the Bundeswehr over the next few years.

The other key idea animating the Strategic Defence Review is that of 'root and branch reform' of the armed forces, including movement towards 'One Defence' or a more 'integrated force'.¹⁸ Although it is not yet clear what this

¹⁶ See: Emma Salisbury, 'China's PLAN: Maritime dominion beyond the South China Sea', Council on Geostrategy, 20/05/2024, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024) and Kevin Rowlands and Edward Hampshire, 'The Chinese navy: From minnow to shark', Council on Geostrategy, 07/12/2022, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

¹⁷ See: 'Defending Britain', Cabinet Office, 23/04/2024, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

¹⁸ 'New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK Armed Forces', Ministry of Defence, 16/07/2024, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).



means, the notion of integration has been gaining ground since the 2021 Defence Command Paper, which promised ‘multi-domain integration’ by the late 2020s.¹⁹

Whatever form the ‘integrated force’ eventually takes, sea power should be its nucleus. The UK is geographically well-placed to lead NATO’s maritime efforts. With Russia’s naval platforms in the North Atlantic largely intact and the PRC’s maritime expansion ongoing, the Strategic Defence Review should prioritise a larger and more potent navy. Not only is this what most of Britain’s most important allies and partners want, but it also serves for the UK as a form of strategic advantage.²⁰ A maritime-led integrated force would provide HM Government with a versatile platform for coordinating operations across all branches of the military. And it would provide the centre of gravity with which to draw in allies and partners, maximising the overall military effectiveness.

Conclusion

Although sea power is critical to any government given Britain’s strategic geography, it is especially important to the new Labour government’s missions. Promoting and bolstering clean economic growth to bring prosperity to the British people will not be possible without sea power, securing trade, connections and energy supplies for the nation. Heightened tensions with revisionist powers within the CRINK, especially Russia and the PRC, coupled with the rise of non-state actors and cyber threats, creates a dynamic security environment which demands a robust maritime strategy. Sea power provides the UK with the flexibility to respond rapidly to crises, whether military or humanitarian. Naval assets can deter threats to the homeland, important infrastructure, and to allies and partners, but they can also be deployed quickly to regions facing instability, demonstrating Britain’s commitment to national and global security.

People outside naval circles, whether in Westminster, Whitehall, or among the wider public, often have a limited understanding of these threats and demands. The Council on Geostrategy’s new Sea Power Laboratory aims to change that by fostering a whole-of-nation approach. It seeks to draw together stakeholders from the armed forces, government, industry, civil society, and the public, to increase awareness of the importance of sea power to Britain’s national enterprise.

The Sea Power Laboratory will act as a marketplace of ideas, fostering an environment to challenge outmoded ideas, generate new thinking, and ultimately feed it into the policymaking process. Combining fresh voices with

¹⁹ ‘Defence in a Competitive Age’, Ministry of Defence, 22/03/2021, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).

²⁰ William Freer and Alexander Lanoszka, ‘What allies want: Appraising Britain’s defence relationships’, Council on Geostrategy, 30/09/2024, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 03/11/2024).



those with deep experience of the maritime domain will provide a laboratory for innovation in thinking and encourage the development of novel approaches to solving the problems Britain faces.

A strong maritime capability is essential for the UK to protect its interests, collaborate with allies, and navigate the complexities of an increasingly unpredictable world. Without a resilient foundation of sea power, the new government will not be able to achieve its missions of a secure nation with clean economic growth to benefit all. Sea power should remain a cornerstone of the UK's strategy, ensuring security and stability at home and abroad.



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