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Innovation and New Strategic Choices

Refreshing the UK's National Strategy for Maritime Security

Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds  and Scott Edwards

2021 is a key moment of opportunity for UK maritime security. The publication of the government's Integrated Review in March is being followed by a systematic 'refresh' of the UK's 2014 National Strategy for Maritime Security. In this article, Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds and Scott Edwards examine the role and significance of this strategy refresh, consider key priority issues for enhancing maritime security, and reflect on the challenges and opportunities that policymakers will face turning strategy into action. They conclude by arguing that getting maritime security right will be critical to delivering on the UK's ambitions in security and foreign policy more widely.

The UK's first National Strategy for Maritime Security in 2014 was a landmark document.¹ It was the first to outline the broad range of threats and risks in the UK maritime domain, underlined the importance of working towards a whole-of-government approach, and installed new governance mechanisms to deal with these challenges. Since 2014, many other states have produced similar strategies, and such documents have become recognised as one of the key tools to strengthen maritime security governance across the world. The UK's 2014 National Maritime Security Strategy was an important milestone in this regard.

In 2021, the UK launched a process to revisit and redraft the strategy. What has become known as the 'strategy refresh' process is driven by the changing position of the UK in the international system, a changing maritime threat picture and revisions in the UK's intra-governmental structures for maritime security.

First, this article examines the role and significance of the strategy refresh, with reference

to the 2014 National Strategy for Maritime Security and related documents. It then turns to the substance of UK maritime security in 2021 and identifies key priority issues for the strategy process. Finally, the authors assess the challenges and opportunities policymakers will face in turning strategy into action.

Why the UK National Strategy for Maritime Security Was a Landmark Document

The UK has a long history of strategic engagement in the maritime domain and successive defence reviews have given much thought to naval affairs particularly.² Increasingly, however, what has become known as the maritime security agenda comprises a wider range of issues than naval power alone.³ These include the threat of maritime terrorism, 'blue crimes' (such as piracy), various

1. HM Government, *The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security*, Cm 8829 (London: The Stationery Office, 2014).
2. Eric Grove, 'United Kingdom Naval Strategy and International Security in the Twenty-First Century', in Joachim Krause and Sebastian Bruns (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Naval Strategy and Security* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 296–304.
3. Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, 'Beyond Seablindness: A New Agenda for Maritime Security Studies', *International Affairs* (Vol. 93, No. 6, 2017), pp. 1299–302.



Royal Navy personnel wearing anti-flash gear in the operations room of the HMS *Prince of Wales*, May 2021. Courtesy of Ministry of Defence/Finn Hutchins/OGL

forms of smuggling, illegal fishing, the protection of critical infrastructure, and marine environmental health and sustainability. These are challenges that are characterised by their diversity and complexity. They take place across and between different sovereign territories and jurisdictional boundaries, cause different kinds of harms, implicate a wide range of departments and agencies in any response, and often interconnect in important ways.

The 2014 National Strategy for Maritime Security was the UK's first attempt to grapple with the maritime security agenda on these terms. It conceives of the maritime domain as an inter-linked and transnational security complex. It focuses primarily on non-traditional security issues, including: upholding international maritime norms; maritime security governance and capacity-building; the protection of ports, ships, infrastructures and maritime trade; the security of UK Overseas Territories; and the fight against organised crime. The National Strategy for Maritime Security is also notable for its cross-governmental approach. The document is introduced by a joint foreword by ministers from the (then) Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Home Office, Ministry

of Defence (MoD) and Department for Transport (DfT). Twenty-two different UK government and Devolved Administration departments or agencies are further identified as having roles and responsibilities in maritime security, including Border Force, the Police Service, Marine Scotland, the Marine Management Organisation and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.⁴

The 2014 National Strategy for Maritime Security was a major milestone in the way that it brought together agencies and established a new governance structure. However, it was also part of a wider reorientation of the UK's maritime security architecture. This process began with the establishment of the National Maritime Information Centre in 2010, in part in consequence of the security planning for the 2012 London Olympics, when it became clear that the UK lacked the mechanisms to enable information and intelligence sharing on maritime security threats, including terrorism, both across agencies and with partners overseas.⁵ The National Maritime Information Centre was complemented in 2017 by the creation of an inter-agency Joint Maritime Operations Coordination Centre to coordinate the UK government's at-sea

4. HM Government, *The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security*, pp. 7, 47–49.

5. Jack Doyle, 'National Maritime Information Centre Will Monitor Threat from Sea', *The Independent*, 22 March 2010.

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assets and capabilities to provide a 'whole-system' response to live maritime security events. In 2020 a new umbrella organisation, the Joint Maritime Security Centre, subsumed both coordination bodies to provide the UK with one dedicated 'centre of excellence' of maritime security. These entities are not 'owned' by a single ministry, but jointly funded and staffed by a range of Whitehall departments and agencies.⁶ A Maritime Threat Group was also formed in February 2021 to function as a regular multi-agency forum for senior officials focused on maritime security threat awareness and horizon scanning.

The establishment of these new coordination mechanisms, but also fundamental changes to the context for UK maritime security governance, have necessitated an update to the strategy. The following sections consider the core challenges faced by the drafting team.

Getting the Drafting Process Right

The first challenge lies in the drafting process itself. The refresh of the National Strategy for Maritime Security is being led and coordinated by the DfT and is due to be completed by the end of 2021. The 25 sections of the document are produced by a group of more than 50 specialists from different UK departments and agencies. The process also includes regular consultation between agencies through forums such as the Maritime Threat Group and meetings with academic experts, industry and other stakeholders.

This process is important because much of the effect of such strategies lies in how they can help to align the interests and visions of different actors in the process.⁷ In other words, the power of the National Strategy for Maritime Security lies as much in the drafting process as in the document that is its final output. All strategies are ultimately about establishing ends, ways and means for policy and implementation, and the relationship between these things. But to do so, they need to identify which ends, which ways and which means are recognised and prioritised in the strategy itself. In the case of

the National Strategy for Maritime Security, this means identifying threats, risks and opportunities in UK maritime security, and providing a framework for how these will be addressed by relevant departments and agencies.

The first challenge lies in the drafting process itself

The nature of such departments and agencies – as with all bureaucratic entities – is that they are specialists focusing on a particular aspect of the problem as a whole. This is especially so in the case of an issue such as maritime security, where diverse interests, roles and activities intersect. In this context, it is natural that different agencies prioritise different risks and have a bias towards certain kinds of responses to them.⁸

The drafting of the strategy offers a process in which these inter-departmental and inter-agency contentions can be articulated, and relationships between agencies and their priorities negotiated. It provides an opportunity for a re-evaluation of the problem at hand and the respective roles of different agencies in addressing it, as well as the capabilities, response mechanisms and resources required to do so. In this sense, the drafting process can also play an important community-building role, as different organisations debate and negotiate with one another to produce a common narrative and hierarchy of responsibilities around which they can coalesce.

The challenge for UK policymakers is to channel these different inputs into a coherent and achievable strategy that will ensure cross-departmental buy-in to the strategy's goals and priorities. The opportunity is that in so doing, they also establish a commonly agreed strategic narrative and action framework for their subsequent implementation. It thus has the potential to consolidate aspirations for multi-agency, cross-government coherence sought through initiatives such as the Joint Maritime Security Centre and build on recent efforts to deliver effective operational coordination at sea.

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6. HC Debate, question from Emma Lewell-Buck to Robert Courts on the Joint Maritime Security Centre, UIN 258, tabled 11 May 2021, answered 17 May 2021, <<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-05-11/258>>, accessed 31 August 2021; HM Government, 'Joint Maritime Security Centre', <<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/joint-maritime-security-centre>>, accessed 31 August 2021.
 7. Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, 'Making Strategy in Practice', in Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R Krebs (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 142–58.
 8. Timothy Edmunds, 'British Civil–Military Relations and the Problem of Risk', *International Affairs* (Vol. 88, No. 2, 2012), pp. 272–75.

Coordinating the Tangle of Strategies

The 2021 National Strategy for Maritime Security process is also important because it takes place in the context of a generalised strategy refresh across government. In recent years, this has led to a proliferation of strategies with relevance to maritime security. Perhaps most importantly, these include the recently published *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*,⁹ but also the DfT's *Maritime 2050* strategy – a 338-page document which outlines the UK's strategic ambitions for the maritime sector more widely.¹⁰ There are many other related UK security strategy or doctrinal documents that are either extant or undergoing revision, in areas such as defence, naval power, organised crime and cyber security. The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security also sits alongside key international strategies and documents, in particular NATO's *Alliance Maritime Strategy*, first published in 2011 and due for its own refresh soon.¹¹

The consequences of Brexit for the UK's approach to maritime security have been profound

There is a logic to this growth of strategy documents, with each operating at a different level of generality and focus. The 2021 Integrated Review, for example, presents an overall statement of UK grand strategy, including, as the title implies, all elements of security, defence, development and foreign policy. The National Strategy for Maritime Security and its bedfellows function as thematic sub-strategies of this wider strategic vision. They provide a more focused and purposive framework for action than is possible for documents such as the Integrated Review.¹² Taken together, these more specialised strategies serve to detail the ways in which the wider goals of grand strategy are to be delivered.

Yet implementing and maintaining the hierarchies and relationships implied by this logic is not straightforward. This is particularly so given

the changing nature of the UK security environment and geopolitical relations, the radically cross-governmental and inter-agency nature of maritime security itself, and the fact that different strategies (and sub-strategies) may have been written at different points in time. In this context, the 2021 National Strategy for Maritime Security faces two main challenges.

First, it needs to generate a distinctive narrative and action plan if it is to achieve its purpose and not become 'lost' in a crowd of similar and related documents. This requires not only that the insights of other relevant strategy documents are drawn together in a coherent way, but also that these are built on to encourage coordination and a stronger UK maritime security response through joint-working.

A second and related challenge is the risk of 'forum shopping' between strategies, with different agencies favouring those that align most closely with their own priorities and interests, and de-emphasising those that do not.¹³ This points again to the importance of multi-agency and cross-government engagement in the drafting process to ensure ownership of the strategy across departments.

Brexit, NATO and a New Multilateralism

The consequences of Brexit for the UK's approach to maritime security have been profound. In 2014, when the first National Strategy for Maritime Security was finalised, the UK was still a full member of the EU, and Brexit only a distant possibility. UK waters were governed in part under EU auspices, in areas including fisheries management and accident prevention, but also migration and asylum arrangements, law enforcement cooperation and intelligence sharing. The Brexit process has disrupted these arrangements significantly. While alternatives have been put in place in some areas such as fisheries or navigation, many of these have yet to mature and few duplicate the depth and extent of their EU predecessors.

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9. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).
 10. Department for Transport, 'Maritime 2050: Navigating the Future', January 2019.
 11. NATO, 'Alliance Maritime Strategy', 18 March 2011, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_75615.htm>, accessed 31 August 2021.
 12. Timothy Edmunds, 'Complexity, Strategy and the National Interest', *International Affairs* (Vol. 90, No. 3, 2014), p. 535.
 13. Stephanie C Hoffman, 'The Politics of Overlapping Organizations: Hostage-Taking, Forum-Shopping and Brokering', *Journal of European Public Policy* (Vol. 26, No. 6, 2019), pp. 885–89.

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For its part, the Integrated Review has remarkably little to say about the relations with the EU. There is no dedicated discussion of the future UK–EU relationship in the document, though considerable attention is given to relations with individual EU member states and to collective security through NATO.¹⁴ UK multilateralism is thus positioned as taking place either through NATO or through state-to-state cooperation on an issue-by-issue, or region-by-region, basis. In this context, the UK faces three main challenges in relation to maritime security post-Brexit.

The UK needs to resettle and sustain new relations with old European partners at sea

First is the need to consolidate independent regulations, arrangements and capacities for domestic maritime security governance. Much of this work has been ongoing through the Brexit process, as the maritime security innovations discussed above indicate. Even so, the National Strategy for Maritime Security process is a key opportunity to settle this emerging governance architecture and set the framework and expectations for UK maritime security outside the EU.

Second, and in the spirit of the new approach to multilateralism and the global nature of UK maritime interests outlined in the Integrated Review, the UK needs to resettle and sustain new relations with old European partners at sea, and foster new global maritime security partnerships with states such as India. Some important steps have already been taken. For example, the UK and France have developed strong bilateral cooperation in some areas of maritime security, including a joint operations centre to tackle small boat migration,

maritime terrorism and information sharing structures between their maritime agencies.¹⁵ The trilateral E3 format, including France, Germany and the UK, offers promise,¹⁶ while cooperative maritime security initiatives with countries such as Australia, India and Japan are also underway.¹⁷ The 2021 National Strategy for Maritime Security needs to build on these foundations to both diminish any risk of disruption caused by Brexit and help consolidate new multilateral arrangements for the future.

Finally, the UK will need to carefully manage its relations with former EU partners in NATO. Of 30 NATO member states, 21 are also members of the EU. The Alliance thus offers the opportunity for the UK to sustain and recast its maritime security relations with former EU partners under the 2016 EU–NATO partnership agreement. However, it cannot replace the previous relations entirely, particularly given an informal consensus that NATO should focus on maritime deterrence and terrorism, with work against blue crime the responsibility of other organisations including the EU. In counterpiracy, for example, it is EU operations, including EUNAVFOR *Atalanta* or the recently launched Coordinated Maritime Presence in the Gulf of Guinea (CMP-GoG), which represent the key multilateral responses. The UK will need to find new ways to contribute to or complement such EU activities, whether through NATO or other forums.

The fact that the EU is itself currently experimenting with different command and control structures for its joint maritime security operations may offer new opportunities in this regard. *Atalanta*, for example, takes place under a shared headquarters, whereas the more recent CMP-GoG employs a more flexible model¹⁸ under which the coordination of national naval forces takes place

14. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, pp. 20, 60–64.

15. Home Office, 'UK and France Sign New Agreement to Tackle Illegal Migration', November 2020, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-france-sign-new-agreement-to-tackle-illegal-migration>>, accessed 27 August 2021; HM Government, 'UK and France Sign New Security Treaty to Protect Passengers on Channel Ferries', <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-france-sign-new-security-treaty-to-protect-passengers-on-channel-ferries>>, accessed 31 August 2021.

16. Alice Billon-Galland and Richard G Whitman, *Towards a Strategic Agenda for the E3: Opportunities and Risks for France, Germany and the UK* (London: Chatham House, 2021).

17. Harsh V Pant and Tom Milford, 'The UK Shifts to the Indo-Pacific: An Opportunity for India-UK Ties', Issue Brief No. 444, Observer Research Foundation, February 2021.

18. Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions Launching the Pilot Case of the Coordinated Maritime Presences Concept in the Gulf of Guinea', 5387/21, 25 January 2021, para. 6.

voluntarily under a Maritime Area of Interest Coordination Cell.

New Patterns of Maritime Insecurity

UK maritime security strategy also needs to pay close attention to how maritime insecurities have evolved since 2014. Taking the established understanding of maritime insecurity as comprising interstate threats, extremist violence and blue crimes as a starting point, the following important trends are apparent.

The first of these is the substantial evolution of grey-zone warfare at sea. This includes new forms of provocations and challenges to freedom of navigation by Russia or China, but also threats posed by states or state-sponsored violent actors, such as in the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁹

Climate change and biodiversity loss have serious consequences for the marine environment

The second is the spill-over of violent extremism on land to the maritime domain, as evidenced by the threat to shipping posed by the conflict in Yemen, but also the emerging situation in northern Mozambique where Islamist militant insurgents have conducted attacks from the sea.²⁰ Also important is the link between blue crime and terrorism, in the light of, for example, smuggling operations by Al-Shabaab in Somalia,²¹ or the engagement of the Abu Sayyaf Group in piracy in the Sulu and Celebes Seas.²²

Third is the continuous evolution of blue crime. While piracy in some regions such as the Western Indian Ocean is contained, the Gulf of Guinea continues to be a hot spot with substantial threats to the shipping industry. Other threats to shipping, whether from cybercrime or stowaways, likewise require attention. Transnational organised smuggling operations, including the smuggling of people into the UK, and the transport of narcotics, weapons and other illicit goods remain prevalent and continue to demand an effective maritime law enforcement response.²³ Moreover, the dramatic consequences of environmental crimes at sea, such as illegal fishing and pollution, for ocean health are becoming increasingly visible to a degree that they require addressing on their own terms.²⁴

Environmental Security at Sea

The Integrated Review places considerable emphasis on the environmental challenges the UK is likely to face in the coming decades. These include the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss, and the critical need to support what it calls a 'resilient ocean', meaning one in which biodiversity loss is reversed and the sustainability of any economic exploitation of ocean resources ensured. However, marine environmental issues were only touched on lightly in the 2014 National Strategy for Maritime Security. This was an important oversight. Indeed, ocean protection is core to the maritime security agenda.

Climate change and biodiversity loss have serious consequences for the marine environment. They will lead to significant changes in marine ecologies, with important implications for the UK marine economy, particularly the fishing industry. Fish stocks may require closer management and protection if they are to remain at sustainable levels.

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19. Caitlin Talmadge, 'Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz', *International Security* (Vol. 33, No. 1, 2008), pp. 82–117; *The Guardian*, "Highly Likely" Iran Was Behind Fatal Oil Tanker Attack – Dominic Raab, 1 August 2021.
 20. Meghan Curran et al., 'Violence at Sea: How Terrorists, Insurgents, and Other Extremists Exploit the Maritime Domain', *Stable Seas*, August 2020; Hugo Decis, 'The Mozambique Channel – Troubled Waters?', *IISS Military Balance Blog*, 7 May 2021.
 21. Katja Lindskov Jacobsen and Julie Høy-Carrasco, *Navigating Changing Currents: A Forward-Looking Evaluation of Efforts to Tackle Maritime Crime Off the Horn of Africa* (Copenhagen: Centre for Military Studies, 2018), pp. 37–38.
 22. Justin V Hastings, 'The Return of Sophisticated Maritime Piracy to Southeast Asia', *Pacific Affairs* (Vol. 93, No. 1, 2020), pp. 5–30.
 23. Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, 'Blue Crime: Conceptualising Transnational Organised Crime at Sea', *Marine Policy* (Vol. 119, September 2020).
 24. Patrick Vrancken, Emma Witbooi and Jan Glazewski, 'Introduction and Overview: Transnational Organised Fisheries Crime', *Marine Policy* (Vol. 105, July 2019), pp. 116–22; Patricia Villarrubia-Gómez, Sarah E Cornell and Joan Fabres, 'Marine Plastic Pollution as a Planetary Boundary Threat – The Drifting Piece in the Sustainability Puzzle', *Marine Policy* (Vol. 96, October 2018), pp. 213–20.

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The establishment of Marine Protected Areas both in UK waters and those of its Overseas Territories has become an increasingly commonplace response to the demands of marine environmental governance.²⁵ In many countries of the Global South, overfishing by industrial fleets has denuded fish stocks which is having serious impacts on coastal livelihoods, food security and stability in impacted countries. There is much evidence, for example, that piracy and smuggling activities in parts of the Global South are consequences of the collapse in the viability of more traditional coastal livelihoods due to overfishing.²⁶

Climate change will also lead to sea-level rise, with challenges that the National Strategy for Maritime Security needs to prepare for today. Existing port and coastal infrastructure may become unviable or require strengthened flood defences. Higher seas and more powerful storms will place new demands on the seakeeping capabilities of ships. The inundation of low-lying areas of land may create new havens from which maritime criminals or terrorists can operate.²⁷ Moreover, the retreat of sea ice is likely to open new shipping routes around the Arctic. This will have implications for the protection of shipping, as well as search and rescue and environmental clean-up capacities in case of accidents at sea.²⁸ It may also lead to new maritime arenas and geopolitical competition with rivals such as Russia.²⁹

The UK can also play a key role in assisting partners in the Global South

Raising awareness of these issues is only the first step. Addressing them implies new implementation demands on UK maritime security in the medium and long term, at home and abroad. Environmental protection regulations and Marine Protected

Areas will need to be policed and enforced if they are to be effective; the new patterns of maritime insecurity likely caused by climate change must be tackled. Adaptations in marine infrastructure and vessel design will need to be planned for. The UK can also play a key role in assisting partners in the Global South to manage their own marine resources and adapt to the likely maritime security impacts of climate change, through capacity-building initiatives but also by supporting action on sustainable fishing, development assistance for coastal livelihoods in impacted states and contributing to disaster preparedness.

The Emerging Need for Data Cable Security

The Integrated Review attaches significant importance to cyber security and the UK digital economy.³⁰ However, the digital economy does not just exist within cyberspace; it is supported by an extensive physical infrastructure too, much of it located in the maritime domain. As the 2014 National Strategy for Maritime Security recognises, 'over 95% of all intercontinental digital traffic travel[s] through underwater cables ... rather than satellites'.³¹ The UK is a key node in this global network of digital communication, and one of the main landing points for transatlantic cables connecting Europe with North America. The security and resilience of the UK digital economy will be dependent not just on an effective cyber security response, but on maritime security too.

The global data cable network is extensive and, in the main, resilient to disruption. The extent of the network means that it incorporates multiple redundancies, at least in those areas of the world where cables are most densely located such as Western Europe. Cable operators also have considerable experience of fixing problems

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25. Peter J S Jones, 'Marine Protected Areas in the UK: Challenges in Combining Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches to Governance', *Environmental Conservation* (Vol. 39, No. 3, 2012), pp. 248–58.
 26. U Rashid Sumaila and Mahamudu Bawumia, 'Fisheries, Ecosystem Justice and Piracy: A Case Study of Somalia', *Fisheries Research* (Vol. 157, September 2014), pp. 154–63.
 27. Basil Germond and Antonios D Mazaris, 'Climate Change and Maritime Security', *Marine Policy* (Vol. 99, January 2019), p. 263.
 28. Johanna Salokannel, Harri Ruoslahti and Juha Knuuttila, 'Arctic Maritime Safety: The Human Element Seen from the Captain's Table', in Lawrence P Hildebrand, Lawson W Brigham and Tafsir M Johansson (eds), *Sustainable Shipping in a Changing Arctic* (London: Springer, 2018).
 29. Alexander Sergunin and Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, 'The Politics of Russian Arctic Shipping: Evolving Security and Geopolitical Factors', *Polar Journal* (Vol. 10, No. 2, 2020).
 30. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, pp. 20–21, 41.
 31. HM Government, *The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security*, p. 32.

quickly when they occur. Even so, the undersea cable network is vulnerable to at least three kinds of risk. The first is that cables may be damaged by human accident, for example by fishing vessels dragging nets along the seabed. Such accidents are relatively infrequent, not least because the locations of undersea cables are carefully mapped and made publicly available for precisely this reason. Second, natural disruptions to the seabed such as tsunamis or undersea landslides can damage the cable network. Finally, data cables may be deliberately targeted by hostile actors, whether those are states engaging in hybrid warfare or digital surveillance activities, terrorist groups seeking to cause economic disruption, or organised criminal groups looking to extort money from governments or businesses.³²

The UK needs to consider how best to strengthen its ability to prepare for and respond to disruption to the undersea cable network. In part, this is about sustaining the capacity to deter, detect and disrupt potential attacks on the cable network by hostile actors. This is likely to include intelligence work, maritime policing tasks and even naval responses, both in the waters where the cables are located but also around coastal landing stations. It is also an issue to which NATO has assigned considerable priority and so will require close cooperation with Alliance partners in the naval domain.³³

The UK needs to consider how best to strengthen its ability to prepare for and respond to disruption to the undersea cable network

In addition, it will entail putting into place strengthened coordination structures to manage such responses effectively. This will include the coordination of legal and regulatory responses, with the undersea cable network located at the intersection of two distinct legal regimes: that of the internet; and that of the sea. It will also require cross-government coordination. This includes

between departments – data cables are the responsibility of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the UK but also implicate the DfT, Home Office and MoD for example – and between their different actors and agencies on the ground. Moreover, and given that the bulk of the cable network is privately owned and maintained, it also necessitates close public–private coordination, both in identifying and responding to threats, but also in fixing any damage if it occurs.³⁴

Finally, while states such as the UK may have resilient undersea cable networks, this is not always the case elsewhere. States in the Global South, and especially many small island states, are often reliant on only a handful of cables for their access to the internet and mobile telecommunications. They are especially vulnerable to any disruption – whether accidental or deliberate.³⁵ UK maritime security policymakers should consider the role the UK can play in assisting other states in strengthening the security and resilience of their undersea cable infrastructures as part of its wider ambitions towards maritime security capacity-building and disaster response in the Global South.

Whither the Indo-Pacific?

One of the most distinctive features of the Integrated Review is the importance it attaches to the Indo-Pacific region. This ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’ is notable both because of what it implies for UK geostrategy, and the implied need to both contain and cooperate with China, but also because it reorientates these priorities towards what is a specifically maritime regional construction. The Indo-Pacific is not bound together by terrestrial geographies and relationships but by oceanic ones. It also presents a series of specifically maritime security challenges. It hosts areas of intense geopolitical competition in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, key shipping chokepoints such as the Malacca and Bab-el-Mandeb Straits, extremist violence in the Sulu and Celebes Seas and Strait of Hormuz, as well as multiple expressions of blue crime including piracy, smuggling of various sorts and illegal fishing.

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32. Christian Bueger and Tobias Liebetrau, ‘Protecting Hidden Infrastructure: The Security Politics of the Global Submarine Data Cable Network’, *Contemporary Security Policy* (Vol. 42, No. 3, 2021), pp. 395–96.
 33. NATO, ‘Resilience and Article 3’, 11 June 2021, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm>, accessed 31 August 2021; Alexandra Brzozowski, ‘NATO Seeks Ways of Protecting Undersea Cables from Russian Attacks’, *Euractiv*, 23 October 2020.
 34. Tara Davenport, ‘Submarine Communications Cables and the Law of the Sea’, *Ocean Development and International Law* (Vol. 43, No. 3, 2012), p. 222.
 35. *Al Jazeera*, ‘Tonga Facing Absolute Disaster after Internet Cable Blackout’, 23 January 2019.

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The Defence Command Paper which accompanied the Integrated Review introduced a series of specific Indo-Pacific initiatives focused on these maritime challenges, though with a predominantly naval flavour.³⁶ These include: an ambition to strengthen the UK's capacity-building and defence engagement in the region; increase its naval presence through the forward deployment of vessels (including offshore patrol vessels suited to maritime security tasks); uphold freedom of navigation principles in the Taiwan Strait and elsewhere; pursue closer defence (and naval) cooperation with regional partners; and to expand the UK Defence Attaché and Advisor network. The deployment of a UK-led carrier strike group to traverse the region in 2021 is an early indication of its seriousness of ambition in this regard.³⁷

2021 presents a moment of opportunity for the UK to rethink its relation to and dependency on the sea in a new strategic environment

The UK's Indo-Pacific tilt also poses important questions for maritime security policy more widely. Three are of particular significance. The first concerns the balance between home and abroad. The UK faces pressing security challenges in its own waters and in the immediate European and North Atlantic maritime regions. Yet, many of the UK's maritime interests are global in nature – such as the protection of maritime trade – which, as the Integrated Review makes clear, also implies a wider, transnational set of responses. The question of how finite resources should be allocated between maritime security demands at home and those abroad, including in the Indo-Pacific, is yet to be fully clarified. This is particularly the case given that some key maritime security assets seem

likely to be forward deployed to the region on a long-term basis.³⁸

Second, there is also the question of how to cohere UK policy across such a vast and diverse space. While maritime security challenges manifest and intersect across the Indo-Pacific as a whole, they also have distinct sub-regional characteristics, whether in the Western Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, East and Southeast Asia or the Western Pacific. Maritime security policymakers need to show how the UK will both zoom in on the specifics of maritime security in these sub-regions, while also zooming out to recognise the interconnections between issues across the region as a whole.

Finally, this challenge of policy coherence is complicated by the fact that the UK is not the only NATO country 'tilting' towards the Indo-Pacific. It follows the lead of the US 'pivot to Asia', and has accompanied similar policy statements and strategy documents on the Indo-Pacific from France, Germany and the EU.³⁹ These shared policy shifts have the potential to develop important synergies of effect between allies in their Indo-Pacific policies. However, they also raise the prospect of duplicated efforts, and even rivalries and contradictions, if efforts are not coordinated sensitively. Such tensions have the potential to manifest in capacity-building and defence engagement activities, and in relations with or between favoured partner states or regional maritime security organisations. A key task for UK maritime security policy will be to identify these points of potential synergy or tension and establish the mechanisms through which they can be managed to best effect.

In each case, part of the answer is likely to include the further development of multilateral collective maritime security arrangements, but also a clearer articulation of the maritime security objectives and missions for UK operations within regions, and a more explicit sense of the hierarchy of UK interests between them.⁴⁰

36. Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 411 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

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Conclusion: Not Missing the Window of Opportunity

2021 presents a moment of opportunity for the UK to rethink its relation to and dependency on the sea in a new strategic environment. The UK has been at the forefront of rethinking maritime security and developing innovative governance solutions for tackling the complexity of issues and agencies this implies. With the strategy refresh it is likely to continue to do so.

As set out in this article, to live up to this promise, a number of substantial challenges need to be tackled. To get the drafting process right, the strategy-makers need to find their way through the relations between strategies, navigate the relations to NATO, the EU and new multilateralism, pay attention to the evolving patterns of maritime insecurity, and tackle environmental and data security at sea. They also need to reflect on what the role of the UK will be in the Indo-Pacific and balance this engagement with efforts in other regions, whether it is the North or South Atlantic, the Mediterranean or the Arctic, or the security of waters closer to home.

Maritime security will be critical to delivering the UK's ambitions in security and foreign policy, as well as for blue economic growth and environmental protection and sustainability. Getting it right should be a core priority for government over the coming decade. ■

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