

UNA-UK response to the Integrated Review 2021



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The UN in the Integrated Review

On Tuesday 16 March the government [published](#) its Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy. The Review was billed as the largest of its kind since the end of the Cold War and a timely opportunity for the United Kingdom to consider the totality of global opportunities and challenges it faces.

UNA-UK welcomes the Review's top-level commitment to being an outward facing values-driven nation, as well as its strong expression of support for international cooperation and human rights. We were also heartened by the announcement that climate change and biodiversity loss will be the UK's foremost international priority.

With respect to UNA-UK's core concern - the United Nations and our international system - the UK indicated a shift from "preserving the post-Cold War rules-based international system" to "shaping the open international order of the future." This is a laudable ambition but one that requires careful calibration and mitigation of risks.

As we have [argued](#), renewing our global system is vital and long overdue: the United Nations is overstretched and underfunded; ill-equipped to manage emerging challenges, in the digital sphere for instance; and too often hamstrung politically on pressing security and human rights matters. It still resembles the world as it was 75 years ago - both in terms of privileging the powers of 1945 and in struggling to manage the multitude of stakeholders that now operate in the international sphere. And it struggles to find the right balance between serving as a global forum, upholding international standards of behaviour and delivering - or delegating - services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a deadly reminder that international cooperation is more urgent - and yet more openly questioned - than ever before. As the Review outlines, the pandemic is only the most recent manifestation of this paradox. Other risks, notably climate change, are likely to prove far more devastating. It is therefore clear that we need a system capable of preventing and responding to such challenges.

The UK can - and should - be an important actor in galvanizing the transformation we need, and UNA-UK welcomes the Review's commitment in this regard. While global power has shifted significantly over the past seven decades, the UK continues to have the expertise and experience to strengthen global governance across the spectrum of issues covered in the Review. It can leverage its past role in shaping international institutions, represented most visibly by its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, as well as the influence it derives from its international development contributions, despite recent cuts. As the Review outlines, it can also deploy its considerable soft power assets and diplomatic network.

However, efforts to overhaul our global system must be approached with caution. At a time of resurgent geopolitical competition and nationalist sentiment, opening up discussions on long-standing mechanisms could see efforts to undermine them. Similarly, the creation of new

mechanisms, which are more likely to be minilateral given this context, carries the risk of encouraging what the UN Secretary-General has called “[the great fracture](#)” into different systems of rules and norms.

Against this backdrop, the tone of the Review can seem aspirational. While the vision of an “open international order” is a much-needed complement to the “Global Britain” agenda, the Review does not set out, beyond some laudable principles, a strategy for how this vision is to be realised given the international political environment and the UK’s position within it.

A targeted and incremental approach focused on those areas of our global system which are most critical and under duress, such as public health and climate change, may serve the UK better than ambitions to overhaul the system as a whole. In these areas too, the Government will need to make significant political, financial and policy investments to drive change.

For a number of reasons, [historical](#) and more [recent](#), the UK must carefully calibrate its tone towards driving change. Often, the [most effective reformers](#) at the United Nations are small and medium-sized powers who are skilled at “leading from behind”, working through cross-regional groupings of states, and who are perceived as leading by example. In this regard, the Review’s emphasis on building resilience at home and abroad could be expanded - and its most tangible announcement, on increasing the UK’s nuclear arsenal, is counterproductive.

Fresh from a [three year consultation and public engagement exercise](#) of our own to determine what viable reforms our coalition should champion, UNA-UK stands ready to support the Government in formulating a strategy for achieving a more open, inclusive, accountable and - above all - effective global system.

Backing commitments with actions

UNA-UK has [long called](#) for more consistency in the UK’s foreign policy approach - as a life-saving end in itself in situations such as the Yemen crisis, and as a means to strengthening the UK’s international standing. In this regard we welcome the Review’s emphasis on cross-Government working and greater coherence between domestic and international commitments. It notes: “A more integrated approach supports faster decision-making, more effective policy-making and more coherent implementation by bringing together defence, diplomacy, development, intelligence and security, trade and aspects of domestic policy in pursuit of cross-government, national objectives.” Furthermore, this long-awaited strategy, published nearly five years after the assumptions that underpinned the [previous strategy](#) were swept aside by the UK’s decision to leave the EU, should bring some [much needed focus](#) to UK foreign policy.

That said, the Review does contain some unreconciled tensions, including between human rights and enhanced trade, and between support for global rules and standards and a clearly expressed desire to be a “[disruptor](#)”. Moreover, in a number of areas [the UK’s actions](#) have not

lived up to its longstanding commitments, reiterated in this Review, and indeed its international obligations. The UK claims it wants to be both a mould breaker and a rule maker, but there will be many occasions on which it will have to choose between those two approaches; the true test will be in how the Government's actions depart from previous practice in the years to come.

UNA-UK's policy agenda

In our [submissions](#) to this process UNA-UK made the case for the UK to utilise our international system as the best form of security and influence available in our multipolar and increasingly interconnected world. We offered policy suggestions in various areas. Below we outline the Review's response in these areas in alphabetical order. There is much to welcome, but also areas of grave concern, most notably on nuclear weapons.

Artificial Intelligence and Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (Killer Robots)

Investment in science and technology is a central theme to the Integrated Review. The strategy has a stated ambition of the UK as a "Science and Technology Superpower". This includes investment in a new agency to develop artificial intelligence - part of the UK's intention to make AI "one of the foundations of our future prosperity". The military is explicitly mentioned as an area where the UK's investments in AI are growing.

This area of the Review is expanded on through a [Defence Command Paper](#), released on 22 March, which looks at how the UK's military will adapt over the next ten years. The paper explains that to "sustain strategic advantage through science and technology" the UK will invest at least £6.6bn in Research and Development (R&D) over the next four years. Specifically, it states that the UK will strategically invest more than £2bn over the next four years in the Future Combat Air System which will "deliver an innovative mix of crewed, uncrewed and autonomous platforms including swarming drones". It is a missed opportunity not to include assurances alongside this announcement that with this new weapons system humans will not be targeted outside of meaningful human control.

UNA-UK believes that plans for investment in military AI and autonomy must be accompanied by corresponding oversight mechanisms to ensure ethical and moral standards are retained. We welcome the UK's acknowledgement of the critical importance that the "UK remains at the forefront of the rapidly-evolving debate on responsible development and use of AI and Autonomy, working with liberal-democratic partners to shape international legal, ethical & regulatory norms & standards" and hope that this may be a signal that the UK may start supporting the [UN Secretary-General's appeal](#) for states to develop a new, binding treaty to prohibit the development of [lethal autonomous weapons systems](#).

Atrocity prevention

The Review offers a much more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of conflict than previous reviews, with a welcome focus on discrimination and marginalisation as drivers of mass violence, a commitment to political and prevention based responses, the establishment of new processes to better understand conflict, and a recognition that preventing atrocities is a specific area of work in need of greater emphasis. While this falls short of the atrocity prevention [strategy](#) we have been calling for, it lays the groundwork for the creation of such a strategy. This remains a vital next step, as this is an agenda that will particularly suffer if government actions do not match commitments, as we have so tragically seen in [Myanmar](#).

Climate Change

It is welcome to see the UK state that climate change as its number one international priority. However, there is an absence of substance behind this headline. The UK needs to use its position as host of the UN climate conference later this year to lead by example on climate change, and generate a step-change in ambition with regard to the Paris Climate Agreement. However, reiterating previously announced carbon zero targets will not suffice. For example, a clear foreign policy strategy for encouraging states to join the global coalition for net zero emissions, as well as other actions [highlighted](#) by the UN Secretary-General.

In addition, we urge the UK to ensure COP26 is the most fair and accessible meeting yet and that climate justice is a [key focus](#). Those most affected by climate change, from the Global South and marginalised communities, have in the past been underrepresented at COP meetings. For meaningful action to be taken, it is vital that their voices are heard.

Democratic foreign policy

We believe the process by which the UK develops such strategies to be vitally important – both in strengthening the strategy itself and in strengthening the ownership and engagement the public have with the strategy.

The Integrated Review identifies the central role for an engaged citizenry in Britain’s approach to security, stating that “It will be essential to take a whole-of-society approach to resilience across the Union...to address challenges such as climate change and global health risks”. Gaining buy in to this “whole of society approach” to tackling threats requires a whole of society approach to developing the security strategy.

UNA-UK therefore hopes that, moving forward, the Government will seek meaningful engagement with civil society and the public. We called for such engagement prior to this Review and were disappointed that outreach efforts for the “largest review of the UK’s foreign, defence, security and development policy since the end of the Cold War” seemed far more limited than for previous reviews. For instance, the smaller-scale national security review held in

2015 that garnered 2000 submissions, the Integrated Review reports that it received less than a quarter of this number of submissions through its public engagement mechanism.

The process for monitoring and evaluating the integrated review is very open ended, in contrast to the 2015 process [which promised a much more comprehensive reporting regimen that ultimately was not delivered](#). We hope the government embraces the opportunity this creates to fully integrate public consultation and ownership of the process into implementation and evaluation processes as they are announced.

Development

We welcome the strong stated commitment to returning to the 0.7% official development assistance target as soon as possible. At a time of unprecedented global humanitarian needs, the UK's [recent spending cuts](#) will have grave implications for some of the world's most vulnerable people. The Government is right to say that despite these cuts, it remains a world leader in development. However, it must acknowledge the impact of these cuts - including on its own security, prosperity and international [standing](#) - and recognise that the sooner it returns to the 0.7% target, the better.

Furthermore, the document says surprisingly little about the purpose of international development, and what it does say presents aid in narrow and instrumental terms. It is undoubtedly the case that investing in development with the objective of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals will have considerable positive impacts on UK prosperity, global influence and soft power. However, if the UK is overly instrumental in its approach, then its aid programmes will be less effective, and ultimately this will also limit the scale of the benefit the UK derives and the level of public support aid enjoys.

Human rights

We welcome the Government's strongly stated commitment to human rights and a values based foreign policy. Given the UK's [recent actions](#) and [public ambivalence about human rights](#), there is likely to be some skepticism about the sincerity of this commitment. The Government should swiftly back up its words with actions. It is unfortunate that days after the publication of this strategy the UK announced an overhaul of its asylum process which prompted [concerns from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#).

We welcome the greater integration of human rights into diplomatic relations. UNA-UK has long called for principled and pragmatic engagement with countries such as China and Saudi Arabia where there are significant areas of disagreement. Doing so would better combine the use of leverage to address gross abuses of human rights with deeper cooperation to reduce tension, manage pressing global challenges such as climate change and avoid the disastrous consequences of zero-sum geopolitics.

We were glad to see that the document supports two ancillary arguments we have made: that in the face of opportunities and challenges of the future the UK should [look beyond traditional allies](#) and form new, principle-led partnerships, and that the UK should [seek regional rapprochement](#) in the Middle East. Such an approach will only be successful if the UK is steadfast in its principles. [Human rights must never be negotiable](#) and deeper engagement must never be used as a rationale for greater complicity in abuses.

Nuclear disarmament

UNA-UK is appalled by the Integrated Review's approach to nuclear weapons, which threatens to substantively undermine the entire strategy as well as the UK's stated desire to act as a supporter of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

The UK's new posture widens the circumstances under which the UK may use nuclear weapons to include the scenario of responding to as yet undefined "emerging technologies". Tobias Ellwood MP, Chair of the Commons Defence Select Committee, voiced alarm at the move, saying: "I'm not sure why that was put in the paper. It is inflammatory. I think it's dangerous talk, and certainly should not have taken place without consideration and discussion with our closest Nato partners."

The Integrated Review also abandons the UK's commitment to reduce warhead stockpiles to 180 and instead introduces a new higher 260 warhead cap. In doing this the UK is, [according to the UN Secretary-General](#), acting "contrary to its obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)" and having a "damaging impact on global stability and efforts to pursue a world free of nuclear weapons". This view is shared by senior figures in the UK's defence community, with former Foreign and Defence Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind stating that "It will weaken the effectiveness of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and invite severe criticism from many non-nuclear weapon states." In contrast, the two countries with the largest nuclear arsenals - the US and Russia - [agreed to maintain the cap](#) on their strategic weapons for another five years just over a month ago.

Further, by abandoning reporting on the number of operational warheads, deployed warheads and deployed missiles, the UK is rolling back progress on nuclear transparency - a key tenet of building trust between nations. This can be seen as irresponsible under the UK's own benchmarks - in 2016, for instance, a UK diplomat [told the General Assembly](#) that "transparency about our arsenal and declaratory policy all contribute to the UK being a responsible Nuclear Weapon State".

The Review's cursory mention of disarmament and non-proliferation is likely to cause concern amongst the vast majority of countries who want to see accelerated progress on this front. The "future capability" section which envisages the UK persisting as a nuclear power for at least two more generations will further fan these flames, putting diplomatic strain on over 130 states that support the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which entered into force in

January this year. The UK should also be wary of asserting the “deep reserves of faith” the UK public has for the UK’s nuclear weapons, given [widespread and increasing opposition to these weapons](#).

Announcing this new posture just five months before the NPT’s planned five-yearly Review Conference will strike a major blow to prospects for progress at this vital meeting which many hoped would breathe new life into a forum that has become gridlocked in recent years, in part, due to the perception that nuclear armed states are ignoring their obligations to work for a world free of nuclear weapons.

Read an op-ed by UNA-UK’s Head of Campaign’s [here](#), and [ICAN-UK’s reaction](#) for further info.

Peacekeeping

We welcome the UK’s ongoing commitment to UN Peacekeeping, evidenced by its [enhanced presence in Mali](#). The Integrated Review also pledges an increased contribution to the successor to the African Union mission in Somalia. We will be interested to hear more about the nature of this contribution as plans for the successor mission evolve. In principle, supporting African Union-led peacekeeping is very welcome and necessary and we hope the support offered is substantial. At the same time, UN Peacekeeping offers something different and equally necessary to regional peacekeeping, and we hope that the UK can also find a way to increase its support to UN missions as well.

Senior appointments

The Review notes the UK “will be active in seeking election to senior positions within international institutions where our interests and values are most directly at stake.” UNA-UK has repeatedly highlighted the urgent need for [merit-based processes](#) for senior appointments at the United Nations, to ensure that these positions are filled by the most qualified candidate. Ultimately, the objective of strengthening the international system depends on good leadership regardless of nationality.

We therefore [encourage the UK to support open, inclusive and merit-based processes](#) across the international system. This should include challenging conventions that restrict appointments, such as regional pre-emption, as well as calling for consistent application of appointment procedures, such as open calls for nominations and the presentation of shortlists including female candidates. We also encourage the UK to advocate for the highest standards of conduct by international civil servants, whose allegiance is exclusively to the organisations they serve.

In terms of its own nominations, it is positive that the UK will be proactive in seeking out and nominating the best possible candidates. We encourage the Government to harness the important contribution that civil society can play in supporting this, including by diversifying the pool of candidates from the UK and in identifying and supporting strong candidates from other countries.