



‘Global Britain’ and security in the near abroad

Leadership through flexilateralism?

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Key points:

- The British government’s vision for a post-Brexit ‘Global Britain’ is increasingly taking shape in (i) the security and defence domain and (ii) the UK’s near abroad.
- Recent policy documents highlight how the UK sees a strengthened role for itself in tackling security and defence challenges in the Euro-Atlantic region, including in the High North and Arctic.
- Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the UK has increased its security and defence engagement in the Euro-Atlantic region further.
- The UK assumes a ‘flexilateral’ approach to security partners in its near abroad. While NATO continues to be the key security framework, the UK increasingly resorts to British-led formats like the Northern Group and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), along with bi- and trilateral engagements.
- With JEF-members Finland and Sweden set to join NATO, there is a potential for JEF to take on a more explicit role as a supporting instrument for the alliance, but also to function as an informal political consultation forum prior to action being taken.

A discursive product of Theresa May’s stint as Prime Minister, the notion of ‘Global Britain’ has stood at the core of the UK’s positive vision for its post-Brexit foreign and security policies.¹ Three years after the UK formally left the EU, ‘Global Britain’ has found its way into strategies and policies across Whitehall. The government’s current guiding document for the approach – ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age’ (The Integrated Review, 2021) – presents a vision for a stronger and more visible UK, present across the globe in a range of policy domains. The document formalises the UK’s so-called ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’, making clear the ambition to become ‘the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence’ in the region. However, it also stresses that the UK’s chief priority remains bolstering collective security in ‘the Euro-Atlantic’. As part of the latter commitment, it highlights the UK’s readiness and ability to help safeguard the High North and the Arctic (UK government, 2021).²

In this research paper**, we follow the trail of ‘Global Britain’ north and into the security and defence domain. Zooming in on official statements, policies, and practices over the last five years,³ we make three overarching observations. First, we observe how the British government’s vision for ‘Global Britain’ is increasingly taking shape in response to the increasingly uncertain security situation in Northern Europe. Second, we observe that this adjustment is reflected not only in speech and rhetoric, but also in the allocation of security and defence resources. Third, we observe that while NATO remains the key security framework, the UK increasingly promotes flexible cooperation formats like the Northern Group and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) in its near abroad.

Filling ‘Global Britain’ with content

Storytelling serves an important function in all societies, weaving facts and occurrences together and adding social meaning to them. Stories also generate audience expectations, presenting certain developments and outcomes as more possible, likely, legitimate, necessary, and desirable than others (Dunn & Neumann 2016). When the result of the 2016 referendum was clear, it fell upon Theresa May’s new government to present an optimistic vision for the UK’s future international role as a non-EU power. In her 2017 Lancaster House speech, delivered some two months before she triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, May introduced ‘Global Britain’ as her vision for UK foreign policy after Brexit: ‘I want us to be a truly Global Britain – the best friend and neighbour to our European partners, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too’, she said (May, 2017).

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1 While the phrase existed in the British public discourse also before the Brexit referendum, May coined it for the post-Brexit era with her Lancaster House speech in 2017.

2 At the time of publication of this brief, the UK was in a process of updating the Integrated Review, an update that was expected to include downplaying the Indo-Pacific tilt and increasing the emphasis on the deteriorating security situation in Europe.

3 The analysis draws on policy documents, scholarly work and conversations with practitioners and researchers in London 13-14 June and 24-25 October; and in Oslo through 2022.

Critics argued, of course, that leaving the EU to boost the UK's global role was a self-contradictory move, politically and diplomatically, as it in effect eradicated a key arena for British influence (see e.g., Ash, 2016). This concern was also raised by then Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013, when he first presented the rationale for holding a referendum on the UK's future in the EU. 'There is no doubt that we are more powerful in Washington, in Beijing, in Delhi because we are a powerful player in the European Union', he said (Cameron, 2013). As a relational identity construction, Global Britain's 'significant other' in this sense became not only the UK's former self as an EU member or the remaining 27 member states, but also its alternative, future self, had it chosen to remain in the EU (see Svendsen, 2020). In the UK's quest for status, the credibility and success of the 'Global Britain' narrative would be evaluated relative to all these three important 'others'. From May's Lancaster House speech and onwards, the 'Global Britain' vision increasingly came to underpin government representations of UK foreign and security policies post-Brexit. The addressees were both critics and backers of the Brexit decision, at home and abroad. For the governments in charge of 'delivering' Brexit, it became important to demonstrate – through policies and practice – that Britain remained a power to reckon with in the global arena.

A tale of multiple tilts

From 2018 onwards, the British government began to operationalize its post-Brexit foreign policy vision and, by way of statements and policy documents, link it to activities and resources. In some instances, this process was mainly about reorganizing efforts under a new shared umbrella – as when some bilateral and strategic FCO funds in 2018 were joined under the heading 'Global Britain fund'. In other instances, the government announced resource increases, as when Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson in 2019 presented 'a major expansion of the UK's diplomatic service' (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2019).

At the outset – including in May's Lancaster House speech – 'Global Britain' was presented as a broad approach, spanning across the world and a wide range of policies. When exemplified, the recurring references were to international trade and the Indo-Pacific region. The Integrated Review (2021) put forth a framework for 'the Indo-Pacific tilt', containing 32 references to 'the Indo-Pacific' and only 15 to 'the Euro-Atlantic'. Given the need to tell a positive story about post-Brexit Britain, it is not surprising that the EU did not figure much in the document, however strategically unwise many in the expert community found it. However, in the three years that have passed since the UK formally left the EU, 'Global Britain' has increasingly come to focus on (i) the security and defence domain and (ii) the Northern European region – including the High North and the Arctic.

First, on security and defence, the 2021 UK Budget and Spending Review contained a separate section summarizing resources allocated to advance 'Global Britain'. Here, security and defence featured prominently. To illustrate, the review announced 'the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War, to safeguard the UK's cutting-edge military, underlining the UK's commitment to NATO' (HM Treasury, 2021). In 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine contributed to further accelerating British defence investments. In its 2022 budget, the government committed to spending 3 per cent of GDP on defence, hence spending well over NATO's baseline target of 2 percent.

Second, on Northern Europe, while the 2021 Integrated Review committed the British government to 'longer and more consistent military deployments' in the Asia-Pacific, the UK's permanent military presence in the area continues to be modest. One team of scholars sees this as evidence that defence continues to have 'an auxiliary function to support the non-military aspects' in the Asia-Pacific (Barry et al, 2022: 37).

The 2018 Arctic Policy Framework stated that 'the UK holds fast to a vision of a Global Britain that is engaged in the world and working with our international partners to advance prosperity and security in the Arctic' (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2018). One scholar points out that while the UK's engagement in the Arctic has traditionally centered on non-military aspects, post-Brexit 'Global Britain' progressed 'by reacting to regional developments and adding the military security dimension to its Arctic security policy' (Cepisnkyte, 2019). 'Security is becoming more prominent in British thinking about the Arctic,' as one insider puts it.⁴ This includes

⁴ Interviews in London, 13-14 June 2022.

'a more joined-up approach across sectors' than what has been the case in the past. At the same time, Britain

is mindful 'not to overstep' its Arctic ambitions, recognizing that it is not an Arctic state.⁵ The Integrated Review (2021) instead situated the UK as the 'nearest neighbour to the Arctic', with an aspiration to keep the Arctic a peaceful and cooperative area. In 2022, the MoD also issued a new strategy document, centering on the High North. The document, entitled 'The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North', is also explicitly linked to the broader 'Global Britain' framing (MoD, 2022). However, practitioners putting UK policy to life dismiss that this should be interpreted a matter of the UK 'returning' to its near abroad. They stress that the UK never left the Euro-Atlantic in the first place.⁶

Relationships reinvested

The British stated interest in, and attentiveness towards, its near abroad and Northern neighbourhood has gradually increased in the last decade. The UK's approach to cooperation in this area may be described as a 'flexilateral' one. In concrete terms, while NATO continues to be the key security framework, the UK has explored its potential as a 'convening power' for groups of 'likeminded' countries.

Insiders note how the UK has increasingly foregrounded sub-regional fora like the Northern Group and – especially – JEF for political dialogue and coordinated action with 'likeminded' European partners.⁷ One noteworthy development is the emergence of a London-based forum termed 'The Northern Lights Breakfast Club', where military attachés from the JEF member countries meet on a regular basis for informal consultation about running matters. This initiative has emerged in an already established structure of meeting points such as Ambassador's lunches in NATO.

The flexilateral ambition is indeed explicitly stated, as illustrated in the MoD strategy that states that in the High North, the UK will

...work with regional Allies and partners, including through NATO, the Northern Group, and the Joint Expeditionary Force, aligning policy, activity, and capability where possible and across all domains (MoD, 2022).

The Northern Group – initiated by the UK in 2010, is a political forum consisting of twelve states who collaborate on security issues in Northern Europe. JEF encompasses ten of the same countries (Germany and Poland are not included) and was initiated by the UK in the context of NATO's Framework Nation Concept in 2012. JEF provides an area for political coordination, but it is also a multinational force which aims to contribute to deterrence, and which can react quickly and be deployed in response to a crisis. In recent years, JEF has become increasingly important as part of UK communication and collaboration with partners in Northern Europe and, especially, the Nordic and Baltic regions. A flexible forum, JEF may – but need not – consist of all its ten member states.

One scholar considers JEF 'one of the clearest articulations of the Global Britain concept to date' (Aronsson, 2021: 5). The UK intends to develop and use JEF further in coming years, and 'London appears to see JEF as a vehicle to deepen cooperation around more initiatives' (Ibid.). The political side of JEF has also been strengthened. With Finland and Sweden set to join NATO, JEF is also returning to an all-NATO frame, making coordination even more seamless than today.⁸

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 JEF initially consisted exclusively of NATO member states when the UK launched it as an offer to complement the German Framework Nations Concept in 2014. Finland and Sweden joined in 2017.

Membership in UK-led initiatives:

JEF	Northern Group
Denmark	Denmark
Estonia	Estonia
Finland	Finland
Iceland	Germany
Latvia	Iceland
Lithuania	Latvia
Netherlands	Lithuania
Norway	Netherlands
Sweden	Norway
United Kingdom	Poland
	Sweden
	United Kingdom

While there has been an increased focus and optimism within the defence ministries of the JEF states as to JEF’s potential contribution to European security, it is interesting to note that following the 2022 sabotage actions against the Nord Stream pipelines in the Baltic Sea, the opportunity to coordinate and act within a JEF frame was not taken. One of the perceived benefits of JEF is that it is envisioned to be used in support to NATO in operations that fall below the Article 5 threshold. However, whereas the investigation of the explosions and patrolling the area could have been a low-hanging fruit for a JEF operation, the JEF states decided instead to act within a NATO framework, possibly to not exclude Germany from the process of dealing with the situation.⁹

In addition to the above, the UK has also intensified its bi- and minilateral collaboration with Nordic and Baltic states in recent years – including bilaterally with Finland and Sweden following their decision to apply for NATO membership. All these initiatives could be seen to play into the UK’s attempt to define itself as an actor in the Northern region and to maintain its status as a European great power and key player in the region.

Concluding remarks

Initially put forth as a broad, internationalist vision with a tilt to the Asia-Pacific, this research paper has argued that ‘Global Britain’ has gradually migrated to the (i) security and defence domain and (ii) the Northern European context. Whether the UK can claim to have successfully relaunched itself as ‘Global Britain’ in the coming years, depends not only on its willingness and ability to match ambitions with resources and action, but also on domestic factors allowing for agreement on contentious issues and the relative order in the political landscape (Glencross & McCourt 2018). Furthermore, the UK’s abilities rely not only on its material resources, but also on its ability to convince small and large allies about its salience as a global player, and a reliable partner and ally. Thus, any evaluation of the UK’s material capacities should be coupled with a consideration of the UK’s status and perceived clout in the world, a status that is contingent on recognition by others. We find that the post-Brexit UK has both the willingness and ability to play a role in security and defence in Northern Europe. So far, the initiatives have been welcomed by its likeminded partners, as demonstrated by the recent energization of JEF and the Northern Group.

⁹ Meetings, London, 24-25 October.

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