

From Global Britain to Atlantic–Pacific

The United Kingdom’s Indo-Pacific Policy under the Integrated Review Refresh 2023

DR. SHINGO NAGATA

Abstract

This article examines the United Kingdom’s Indo-Pacific policy as outlined in the *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World (IR23)*. Released in March 2023, this foreign policy and national security paper builds upon the *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR21)*, which codified the post-Brexit foreign policy initiative *Global Britain* in March 2021, with the Indo-Pacific Tilt policy as a central component. However, in *IR23*, the Indo-Pacific policy was positioned within the Atlantic–Pacific partnership, as opposed to *Global Britain*. This article argues that through the utilization of the Anglo-French defense and security cooperation, the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) defense security cooperation framework, and the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), London demonstrates a clear long-term commitment to promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region by fostering the Atlantic–Pacific partnership.

On 16 March 2021, the United Kingdom unveiled *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR21)*, a comprehensive policy paper codifying its foreign and security objectives for the next decade. At the core of this post-Brexit foreign policy initiative was the Indo-Pacific Tilt, emphasizing the United Kingdom’s strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region.

In line with this commitment, London deployed the Carrier Strike Group (CSG21), led by the new aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, to the Indo-Pacific from May to December 2021. This significant endeavor was accompanied by the United Kingdom’s recognition as the eleventh full dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in August 2021. Additionally, in September that same year, the United Kingdom, along with Australia and the United States, launched the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) defense security cooperation framework, which included plans for supporting Australia’s procurement of nuclear attack submarines (SSN).

However, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, adjustments to the *IR21* became necessary. As a result, on 13 March 2023, the

United Kingdom released the *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World (IR23)*, a revised policy paper addressing the evolving global landscape.¹

The Indo-Pacific Policy within the Atlantic–Pacific Partnership

With *IR23*, London shifted its focus towards addressing China as a pacing threat, prioritizing it over Russia during Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. The paper stated, “Tensions in the Indo-Pacific are increasing and conflict there could have greater global consequences than the conflict in Ukraine.”² While *IR21* categorized Russia as an “acute threat,” *IR23* continued to view Russia as “the most acute threat,”³ with no substantial change in its positioning as an immediate concern despite the Ukraine invasion. Conversely, the description of China became even more alarming. In *IR21*, China was labeled a “systemic competitor” alongside Russia, whereas in *IR23*, it was described as an “epoch-defining challenge” to the United Kingdom and the international order, reflecting heightened caution.⁴

In light of this context, *IR23* not only included a column entitled “The UK’s Policy towards China”⁵ but also addressed the situation in Taiwan for the first time. Moreover, *IR23* elevated the Indo-Pacific region’s priority from a mere “tilt” to becoming “a permanent pillar of the UK’s international policy” emphasizing a long-term strategic approach.⁶ Notably, *IR23* clarified London’s stance on developing an Indo-Pacific policy aligned with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision led by Japan and the United States. While FOIP was not discussed in *IR21*, *IR23* stated that “a core tenet of the UK’s approach to the Indo-Pacific will be to support the vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific shared by many regional partners.”⁷

In contrast to *IR21*, *IR23* omitted the explicit mention of *Global Britain* in its content. Instead, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) deepened its relationships with like-minded Indo-Pacific countries in recent years, the United Kingdom transcended the confines of the aforementioned term. It positioned its defense and security cooperation with Indo-Pacific nations within a newly

¹ HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*, CP811 (London: Stationery office, 2023).

² *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 8.

³ *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 7.

⁴ *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 3, 6, 12, 30.

⁵ *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 30–31.

⁶ *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 22.

⁷ *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 22.

formed multilateral partnership network known as the *Atlantic–Pacific*. This network serves as a bridge connecting the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, serving as a defining characteristic of *IR23*.⁸

Furthermore, with the release of *IR23*, British leaders emphasized the United Kingdom's long-term commitment to security cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries clear by aligning it with the Atlantic–Pacific partnership.

Anglo-French Defense and Security Cooperation

During the Anglo-French summit in Paris on 10 March 2023, which preceded the release of *IR23*, defense and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region were discussed, and the agreements reached were promptly incorporated into *IR23*.⁹

France, being the first country in Europe to formalize an Indo-Pacific strategy due to its overseas territories and a significant portion of its exclusive economic zone located in this region, holds a unique position. On the other hand, the United Kingdom has actively engaged in Southeast Asia security through Commonwealth defense cooperation frameworks such as the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and the British Forces Brunei (BFB). Consequently, it can be argued that the two countries, sharing common interests in the Indo-Pacific, enjoy a mutually complementary relationship in regional defense and security cooperation.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to anticipate that as NATO aims to collaborate with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific to address China's growing military influence, the United Kingdom and France, equipped with strategic assets capable of projecting their presence effectively, notably aircraft carrier strike groups, will assume leading roles in these endeavors.

Against this backdrop, the Anglo-French summit revealed a commitment to cooperate on the rotational deployment of carrier strike groups, demonstrating Europe's persistent presence in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁰ In a show of support for future cooperation, the United Kingdom participated in the French-led multilateral joint naval exercise La Perouse 23 alongside Japan, the United States, India, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand in the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean on 13–14 March 2023.

⁸. *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 1, 9.

⁹. Richard Whitman, "The Anglo-French Summit: A Modest Advance in Foreign, Security and Defence Policy?" *UK in a Changing Europe*, 14 March 2023, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/>.

¹⁰. "UK and France Commit to Greater Defence Cooperation at Paris Summit" (press release, Government of the United Kingdom, 10 March 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

France operates a single aircraft carrier, the FS *Charles de Gaulle*, while the United Kingdom operates two *Queen Elizabeth*-class carriers. Notably, the latter deploys F-35 Joint Strike Fighters operated by allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea, fostering interoperability and cooperation between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. Given these circumstances, the United Kingdom is expected to play a prominent role in the deployment of the Anglo-French Carrier Strike Group to the Indo-Pacific.

AUKUS

AUKUS, a defense and security cooperation framework announced abruptly in September 2021, was established with China's military advancements in mind. Concurrent with the release of *IR23* on 13 March 2023, the leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia declared in San Diego, California, their agreement to support Australia's acquisition of SSNs, which is the primary objective of AUKUS. The "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS" outlined the following details:

- Beginning in 2023, Australian military and civilian personnel will embed with the U.S. Navy, the Royal Navy, and in the United States and United Kingdom submarine industrial bases to accelerate the training of Australian personnel. The United States plans to increase SSN port visits to Australia beginning in 2023, with Australian sailors joining U.S. crews for training and development; the United Kingdom will increase visits to Australia beginning in 2026.
- As early as 2027, the United States and United Kingdom plan to begin forward rotations of SSNs to Australia to accelerate the development of the Australian naval personnel, workforce, infrastructure and regulatory system necessary to establish a sovereign SSN capability.
- Starting in the early 2030s, pending Congressional approval, the United States intends to sell Australia three Virginia class submarines, with the potential to sell up to two more if needed. This step will systematically grow Australia's sovereign SSN capability and support capacity.
- In the late 2030s, the United Kingdom will deliver its first SSN-AUKUS to the Royal Navy. Australia will deliver the first SSN-AUKUS built in Australia to the Royal Australian Navy in the early 2040s.¹¹

¹¹ "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS" (press release, Government of the United Kingdom, 13 March 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

On 13 March 2023, just before *IR23* was released, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced a £5 billion increase in defense spending over the next two years, aiming to achieve a long-term defense spending-to-GDP ratio of 2.5 percent.¹² Examining the allocation of the £5 billion increase, it is worth noting that £3 billion has been designated to support nuclear-related ventures, including the cost associated with supporting SSN procurement under AUKUS.¹³

Therefore, *IR23* can be viewed as a diplomatic and security directive intended to solidify AUKUS's comprehensive trajectory. Notably, the simultaneous release of *IR23* with the announcement of the AUKUS support plan by the leaders of the bloc highlights the United Kingdom's enduring commitment to Indo-Pacific security, with AUKUS serving as a vital component of the Atlantic-Pacific partnership, which takes into account China's military advancements.

Global Combat Air Programme

In addition to AUKUS, *IR23* also highlighted the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) as a crucial element of the Atlantic-Pacific linkage. In December 2022, the leaders of Japan, the United Kingdom, and Italy announced the joint program aimed at developing a next-generation fighter aircraft, set to be operational by 2035 and intended to replace Japan's F-2 fighter and the Royal Air Force's Eurofighter. The significance of GCAP extends beyond the fighter development aspect, as emphasized in the "Joint Leaders' Statement." The program's "global" designation signifies the intention to foster future "inter-operability with the United States, with NATO and with our partners across Europe, the Indo-Pacific and globally."¹⁴

Shortly after the release of *IR23*, the first meeting of the Japanese, UK, and Italian defense ministers was held in Tokyo on 16 March 2023 to discuss cooperation on the GCAP. This meeting took place on the sidelines of DSEI Japan 2023, an international defense equipment exhibition sponsored by a British company and held near Tokyo 15–17 March 2023. The GCAP, which showcased a model of the next-generation fighter jet, was the central focus of discussions at DSEI.¹⁵ At the ministerial meeting, British Minister of Defence Ben Wallace

¹² "PM Announces Major Defence Investment in Launch of Integrated Review Refresh" (press release, Government of the United Kingdom, 13 March 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

¹³ "PM Announces Major Defence Investment."

¹⁴ "Joint Leaders' Statement: UK-Italy-Japan: 9 December 2022" (policy paper, Government of the United Kingdom, 9 December 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

¹⁵ "Global Combat Air Programme Takes Centre Stage at DSEI Japan" (press release, Government of the United Kingdom, 16 March 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

and Italian Minister of Defense Guido Crosetto also recognized the significance of GCAP for the United Kingdom and Italy in terms of the Atlantic-Pacific linkage, stating that “the security of Europe and Asia is inseparable, and affirmed that the Indo-pacific region is also critical for the UK and Italy.”¹⁶ Additionally, they highlighted the importance of cooperation with Japan as a vital partner in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁷

During his keynote speech on March 15, the opening day of DSEI, Defense Minister Wallace conveyed the following statement:

GCAP is not going to be a short love affair. It’s going to be a marriage. AUKUS was another project we announced this week—the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, developing the next generation of nuclear attack submarines. That’s a 20, 30, 40 year programme. And GCAP will be of a similar length. So when we as the nations committed to this programme, there’s no going back.¹⁸

These remarks clearly indicate that the purpose of GCAP and AUKUS is to establish a framework for long-term defense security cooperation between the United Kingdom and Indo-Pacific countries.

Conclusion

With the publication of *IR23*, London has unequivocally emphasized the Indo-Pacific region as “a permanent pillar of the UK’s international policy” from a long-term strategic perspective, despite the ongoing crisis of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, *IR23* has affirmed the United Kingdom’s proactive role in fostering defense and security cooperation between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific countries by aligning its Indo-Pacific policy within the framework of the Atlantic-Pacific partnership.

Simultaneously with the release of *IR23*, London has actively advanced the Atlantic-Pacific partnership through initiatives such as the Anglo-French summit, the announcement of the AUKUS plan, and the Japan-United Kingdom-Italy defense ministers’ meeting to discuss the GCAP. These endeavors substantiate London’s enduring commitment to promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region over the long term. 🌐

¹⁶ “Trilateral Defense Ministerial Meeting” (press release, Ministry of Defense, Government of Japan, 16 March 2023), <https://www.mod.go.jp/>.

¹⁷ “Trilateral Defense Ministerial Meeting.”

¹⁸ Ben Wallace, “UK Defence Secretary - Keynote Speech DSEI Japan 2023” (speech transcript, Government of the United Kingdom, 15 March 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

Nagata

Dr. Shingo Nagata

Dr. Nagata is a visiting researcher at the Institute of Human and Social Sciences, Kanazawa University, Japan. He also serves as an editorial board member of the Japan Society of Strategic Studies.

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