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Commentary # 7

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Great Britain Returns to the Helm:

The UK's Expanding Role in Europe's New Security Architecture

July 2025

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Great Britain Returns to the Helm: The UK's Expanding Role in Europe's New Security Architecture

The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2025 has catalyzed tectonic shifts in transatlantic relations, prompting European powers to reassess the foundations of their collective defense. In this process, the United Kingdom has emerged as a central player not as a nostalgic former empire nor merely a post-Brexit outlier, but as a proactive architect of Europe's evolving security order. At the heart of this strategic reawakening lies in its 2025 Defence and Security Review, which is blueprint that outlines a bold vision for integrated leadership within NATO, regional resilience-building, and forward-leaning support to Ukraine.

Rather than reverting to old models of global ambition, the document reflects a sober, capability-based pragmatism, it underlines that Europe is the UK's "priority theatre." It recognizes that U.S. reliability under the Trump administration is once again a variable, not a constant. With that, the UK is positioning itself as both a strategic anchor within NATO and a linchpin of innovative European defense cooperation.

Defence Review 2025: From Global Britain to Euro-Atlantic Backbone

The 2025 Defence and Security Review [marks](#) a noticeable pivot from the global expeditionary ambitions articulated in the 2021 and 2023 Integrated Reviews. While it retains references to a "Global Britain," the document unequivocally identifies the Euro-Atlantic area as the principal arena for UK defense investments, military deployments, and political focus over the coming decade.

Three strategic priorities dominate the Review:

1. **Reinforcing NATO as the UK's core multilateral defense framework**, with emphasis on interoperability, burden-sharing, and rapid response forces;
2. **Integrating UK-led and regional security coalitions into NATO-compatible formats**, including the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), Northern Group, and new "hybrid task units" designed to counter grey zone threats;
3. **Leading the long-term security assistance framework for Ukraine** through formalized leadership of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in Europe.

This shift is both political and operational. By de-emphasizing the Indo-Pacific in terms of defense deployments (though retaining economic and technological cooperation), the UK is doubling down on its European credentials not through EU defense structures, but through NATO, minilateralism, and bilateral security pacts.

Leading from the Middle: Revitalizing NATO Through Integration

One of the most significant evolutions in the UK's 2025 posture is its deliberate effort to reintegrate regional security initiatives into the NATO framework. While previously UK's post-Brexit approach to European defense cooperation appeared fragmented, favoring flexible coalitions over institutional anchoring, 2025 Review signals a move toward consolidation and coherence.

The Joint Expeditionary Force ([JEF](#)) (a UK-led coalition of 10 Northern European nations) has been [formally realigned](#) to serve as a rapid reaction force under the NATO Response Force (NRF+) umbrella, with pre-agreed political escalation pathways and NATO-compatible command [structures](#). This represents a notable advancement: JEF is no longer just a political gesture of regional solidarity, but a standing operational force explicitly designed to reinforce NATO's eastern flank.

In parallel, the [UK-Nordic-Baltic cyber defense cell](#), launched in early 2025, has been [integrated into](#) NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. This effort allows the UK to shape NATO's evolving cyber deterrence policy while anchoring its leadership in tangible capabilities, especially in areas where NATO's doctrinal and operational frameworks still lag behind the threat environment.

Through these moves, the UK is not seeking to replace NATO or act outside its bounds, it is aiming to modernize and operationalize NATO from within, by offering platforms, forces, and partnerships that can bridge gaps in Alliance cohesion and capability.

Ukraine: From Solidarity to Structured Security Leadership

Perhaps the most profound expression of the UK's post-2025 strategic recalibration is its [leadership](#) of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG), a restructured mechanism born out of the Ramstein format but now formalized [under](#) NATO-UK co-leadership. Recognizing the uncertainty surrounding U.S. leadership and long-term congressional support for Ukraine, the UK has moved quickly to institutionalize European military assistance under a single, coherent platform, with the UK serving as the main logistical and political hub.

Under this format, the UK coordinates European defense contributions across four critical sectors:

- **Air Defense and Long-Range [Fires](#)**, including the provision of Storm Shadow, NASAMS, and training packages;
- **Armored Mobility and Ammunition Supply**, secured through joint procurement programs with [Poland](#), [Germany](#), and the Czech Republic;
- **[Cyber Defense](#) and [ISR \(Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance\)](#) [led](#)** from the UK's National Cyber Force HQ;

- **Officer Training and Strategic Planning for Ukrainian Armed Forces**, [expanding](#) the long-running Operation Interflex.

Unlike previous *ad hoc* coalitions, the UDCG has been given a formal liaison cell at NATO SHAPE headquarters, ensuring real-time coordination with NATO’s defense planning and deterrence posture. This positions the UK not only as a military donor but as a strategic synchronizer between Ukraine, NATO, and the broader European security community.

In doing so, the UK is also carving out space for future security guarantees to Ukraine that, while not formal Article 5 commitments, could evolve into a NATO-compatible “security transition pact” - a model under active discussion within the [JEF](#) and similar frameworks.

A Maritime and Northern Flank Pivot

While land power and Eastern Europe dominate headlines, the 2025 Review also renews UK’s commitment to maritime dominance in the High North, North Atlantic, and Baltic Sea, a role critical to securing NATO’s northern flank and reinforcing transatlantic sea lines of communication.

Royal Navy [deployments](#) in 2025 have nearly doubled in the GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-UK) gap, in close coordination with the U.S. Sixth Fleet and Norwegian command centers. The Littoral Response Group (North), based in Scotland, has been [forward-deployed](#) to Tromsø, Norway, on a [near-permanent](#) basis, sending a strong signal of deterrence to Russian submarines and long-range missile platforms operating out of the Kola Peninsula.

Moreover, the UK’s defense review [pledges](#) increased integration of undersea surveillance capabilities and space-based ISR into NATO’s Maritime Command (MARCOM), in a bid to ensure the Alliance is prepared for a conflict that spans all domains: sea, cyber, space, and air.

Challenges to Ambition: Resources and Politics

Despite its forward-leaning strategy, the UK’s ambitions are not immune to friction. Resource constraints remain acute, especially as inflation, defense procurement bottlenecks, and recruiting shortfalls continue to affect readiness. While the 2025 Review reaffirms the government’s commitment to reaching 2.5% of GDP in defense spending by 2027, questions remain about whether that timeline can hold amid domestic economic pressures.

Moreover, the UK’s reliance on bilateralism requires constant diplomatic maintenance. As European partners increasingly seek coherence through EU security structures, the UK’s ability to lead from outside Brussels may be tested, especially if a Labour government shifts toward more EU-friendly institutional language.

Still, the core of the UK’s strategic message is intact: **deterrence by action, not declaration; leadership by capability, not committee; and defense through integration, not insulation.**

Conclusion: A Pillar, Not a Substitute

The UK's 2025 defense posture is not an attempt to go it alone, nor to replace the United States or the European Union. Rather, it is a demonstration of what a capable, committed, and strategically nimble European power can do when institutional boundaries are treated as bridges, not walls.

By fusing bilateral partnerships with NATO structures, leading the European front of Ukraine's defense, and revitalizing regional coalitions, the UK is proving that strategic autonomy and alliance cohesion are not mutually exclusive. In the shadow of an unpredictability of the U.S., and amid growing instability in Eastern Europe and the High North, the UK's role as a security actor has rarely been more necessary or more ambitious.

The age of post-Brexit ambiguity is over. The UK is back at the center of European security by design, by demand, and by determination.

July 2025



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