

---

Research  
Paper

Russia and Eurasia  
Programme

January 2022

# A new Russia policy for post-Brexit Britain

The UK must abandon its  
delusions to deal effectively  
with Russia

Duncan Allan and Ian Bond



**Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is a world-leading policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help governments and societies build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.**

## Summary

- The UK's 2021 Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy describes Russia as 'the most acute direct threat to [the UK's] security' in the 2020s. Relations did not get this bad overnight: the trend has been negative for nearly two decades. The bilateral political relationship is now broken.
- Russian policymakers regard the UK as hostile, but also as weaker than Russia: a junior partner of the US and less important than Germany within Europe. The consensus among Russian observers is that Brexit has reduced the UK's international influence, to Russia's benefit.
- The history of UK–Russia relations offers four lessons. First, because the two lack shared values and interests, their relationship is fragile and volatile. Second, adversarial relations are the historical norm. Third, each party exaggerates its importance on the world stage. Fourth, external trends beyond the UK's control regularly buffet the relationship.
- These wider trends include the weakening of the Western-centric international order; the rise of populism and opposition to economic globalization; and the global spread of authoritarian forms of governance.
- A coherent Russia strategy should focus on the protection of UK territory, citizens and institutions; security in the Euro-Atlantic space; international issues such as non-proliferation; economic relations; and people-to-people contacts. The UK should pursue its objectives with the tools of state power, through soft power instruments and through its international partnerships. Despite Brexit, the EU remains an essential security partner for the UK.
- In advancing its Russia-related interests, the UK should have four operational priorities: rebuilding domestic resilience; concentrating resources on the Euro-Atlantic space; being a trusted ally and partner; and augmenting its soft power.
- UK decision-makers should be guided by four propositions. In the first place, policy must be based on clear, hard-headed thinking about Russia. Secondly, an adversarial relationship is not in itself contrary to UK interests. Next, Brexit makes it harder for the UK and the EU to deal with Russia. And finally, an effective Russia policy demands a realistic assessment of UK power and influence. The UK is not a 'pocket superpower'. It is an important but middling power in relative decline. After Brexit, it needs to repair its external reputation and maximize its utility to allies and partners, starting with its European neighbours.

## Introduction

In March 2021 the UK government published *Global Britain in a competitive age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, which describes Russia as ‘the most acute direct threat to [the UK’s] security’ in the 2020s.<sup>1</sup> This represents a dramatic shift in the government’s perspective since the publication of the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), which barely mentioned Russia except to say that the UK was working with it and other states and groupings of countries to reduce oil and gas demand, and was building up political and security dialogue with Russia alongside China, Brazil and Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> Even now, however, there are doubts about whether the UK government is sufficiently clear-eyed about the threat that Russia poses to vital UK interests and whether it appreciates just how limited the prospects for meaningful cooperation with Russia are. Moreover, the UK’s departure from the EU will leave it more isolated in dealing with Russia, and will reduce its influence in shaping the Russia policies of its European partners.

This paper is structured as follows. The first half analyses the troubled state of the UK–Russia relationship. It starts by reviewing events since early 2000, shortly after Vladimir Putin had become acting president of Russia upon the resignation of Boris Yeltsin.<sup>3</sup> It goes on to examine Russian views of the UK and of the impact of Brexit on the UK’s international standing. It then draws several lessons from the recent turbulent history of the bilateral relationship and underlines the scale of the challenge that faces UK policymakers. The second half of the paper sets out recommendations for how the UK should fashion an effective post-Brexit Russia policy for the remainder of the current decade. It identifies the UK’s core Russia-relevant interests, considers the extent to which these interests are compatible with those of Russia, discusses the main policy instruments available to the UK and recommends some operational priorities. The paper concludes with a series of propositions that should guide the thinking of UK decision-makers.

## UK–Russia relations since 2000

### A difficult and volatile relationship

Since 2000, UK–Russia relations have moved through five phases. From early 2000 to mid-2003, they were on an upward trajectory. In late 1999 the team around Putin (then Russia’s prime minister) identified UK Prime Minister Tony Blair as someone who could facilitate the new Russian leader’s entrance onto the world stage: modern, media-savvy, more likely than some of his Western contemporaries to remain in office for a long time, and on good terms with his US and EU allies. Blair visited Russia in March 2000, shortly before Putin was elected president. During the next three years the relationship between the two leaders blossomed. Bilateral commercial

<sup>1</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, London: HMSO, p. 18, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/975077/Global\\_Britain\\_in\\_a\\_Competitive\\_Age-the\\_Integrated\\_Review\\_of\\_Security\\_Defence\\_Development\\_and\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> HM Government (2010), *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, London: The Stationery Office Limited, pp. 51 and 61, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/62482/strategic-defence-security-review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62482/strategic-defence-security-review.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Putin became acting president on 31 December 1999, and was elected president on 26 March 2000.

ties rebounded as Russia's economy recovered from the financial crisis of 1998, culminating in a landmark deal on 1 September 2003 between BP and TNK (the Tyumen Oil Company), one of Russia's principal oil producers.<sup>4</sup> Relations weathered disagreements over the US-led invasion of Iraq in early 2003, in which UK forces participated; Russia's war in Chechnya; the UK's unease over democratic backsliding in Russia; and increasingly fractious US–Russia relations. In June 2003, Putin became the first Russian leader since 1874 to pay a state visit to the UK.

## **The period from late 2003 to November 2006 saw a spectacular breakdown in UK–Russia relations.**

The second phase, from late 2003 to November 2006, saw a spectacular breakdown in relations. A watershed occurred when the UK refused in early September 2003 to extradite a fugitive tycoon and Putin opponent, Boris Berezovsky, to Russia.<sup>5</sup> The bilateral relationship then soured, because of a number of factors. These included UK concern at growing authoritarianism in Russia; Blair's decision not to attend the events staged in Moscow in May 2005 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War;<sup>6</sup> pressure by Russian regulators on BP and Shell;<sup>7</sup> and the campaign of harassment that was waged against the UK ambassador in Moscow, Sir Tony Brenton, by Nashi, a Putin-supporting nationalist youth movement that targeted Brenton for meeting with civil society organizations. Relations nosedived in November 2006, when Aleksandr Litvinenko, a former officer in Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) who had been granted asylum and citizenship in the UK, was murdered in London with radioactive polonium, almost certainly by FSB operatives.

In the third phase, which ran from 2007 until early 2014, there was an uneasy stabilization of relations. By mid-2007 – having expelled four intelligence officers from Russia's embassy in London and cut engagement with the FSB, but having failed to secure the extradition of the prime suspects in the Litvinenko case – the Labour government had decided to move on. It still judged Russia to be an important security interlocutor, albeit an increasingly hostile one. The financial crisis which began in 2008 made the government even keener to improve relations: it put fresh emphasis on commercial diplomacy to support economic recovery.<sup>8</sup> The election of Barack Obama as US president in November 2008, and the 'reset' in relations with Russia that he launched in 2009, also influenced UK policy.

<sup>4</sup> The deal created a joint company, TNK-BP, owned 50:50 by the parent companies.

<sup>5</sup> The incumbent UK Home Secretary, Jack Straw, granted refugee status to Berezovsky on 9 September 2003, and on the following day a UK court refused to extradite him to Russia. (The authors are grateful to Professor Bill Bowring of Birkbeck, University of London, for clarifying the background.) In a similar decision on 13 November, a UK court rejected a Russian request for the extradition of Akhmed Zakayev, a senior member of the Chechen separatist government.

<sup>6</sup> Given the iconic significance of the war (referred to as the Great Patriotic War) for Russians, 9 May is arguably the most important date in the Russian calendar. Blair did not travel to Moscow because he was finalizing his new cabinet following the UK general election on 5 May 2005. The UK government was represented at the event by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott.

<sup>7</sup> Pressure from Russia's environmental regulator forced TNK-BP to sell its licence to the Kovykta gas field; Shell had to relinquish control over the Sakhalin-2 oil and gas project. Russia's state-owned gas supplier, Gazprom, was the beneficiary both times.

<sup>8</sup> At the time there was considerable interest in the BRIC grouping (Brazil, Russia, India and China), which encouraged the misplaced view that Russia was an 'emerging' economy.

This rapprochement was continued by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, headed by David Cameron, that took office in the UK in May 2010. The 2010 SDSR took a relaxed view on Russia: its 75 pages made just two (largely positive) references to the country.<sup>9</sup> Commercial and geopolitical considerations were again at play. In October 2012 BP announced that it would take a 19.75 per cent stake in Rosneft, Russia’s largest state-owned oil company, which had bought out BP’s private Russian partners in TNK-BP.<sup>10</sup> In March 2013 the inaugural ‘2+2’ meeting of UK and Russian foreign and defence ministers took place in London. Yet the clouds were darkening, with growing instability in the Middle East and especially in Syria, a renewed Russian domestic crackdown following Putin’s re-election as president in March 2012, and, most fatefully, the growing EU–Russia stand-off over Ukraine in 2013–14.

The fourth phase, during which bilateral relations entered another downward spiral, began in February 2014 and ended in March 2018. Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea, and its subsequent war in eastern Ukraine, shattered UK policymakers’ complacency. The UK pushed for Russia’s suspension from the G8 (March 2014) and for the imposition of sanctions by the US and EU (March to July 2014); and it supported the conclusions of the Wales Summit of NATO leaders (September 2014), at which NATO committed to strengthen its presence on the territory of its eastern members.

The transformation of official UK views was evident in the 2015 SDSR, commissioned by the new Conservative government, again led by Cameron.<sup>11</sup> Unlike in the 2010 SDSR, Russia was mentioned frequently, in particular in a section entitled ‘The resurgence of state-based threats’, which stated that: ‘Russia has become more aggressive, authoritarian and nationalist, increasingly defining itself in opposition to the West’. It went on to assert that Russia’s annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine ‘have shown Russia’s willingness to undermine wider international standards of cooperation in order to secure its perceived interests’.<sup>12</sup> The document emphasized UK support for Ukraine, and the need for coordination with allies and partners.<sup>13</sup> It went on to state that ‘We [...] want to keep open the possibility of cooperation’, giving the example of international efforts to combat the threat posed by the so-called Islamic State group and citing successful cooperation with Russia on negotiations on Iran’s nuclear programme.<sup>14</sup> However, Russia’s brutal military intervention in the Syrian conflict in 2015 further exacerbated bilateral tensions. In January 2016 an official inquiry into the Litvinenko murder (belatedly announced in 2014) concluded that both Putin and FSB director Nikolai Patrushev had ‘probably’ approved the killing.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> HM Government (2010), *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, pp. 51 and 61.

<sup>10</sup> The deal was finalized the following March. BP (2013), ‘Rosneft and BP complete TNK-BP purchase and sale transaction’, Press release, 20 March 2013, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/news-and-insights/press-releases/rosneft-and-bp-complete-tnk-bp-sale-and-purchase-transaction.html>.

<sup>11</sup> HM Government (2015), *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, London: The Stationery Office Limited, especially p. 18, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>15</sup> Owen, R. (2016), *The Litvinenko Inquiry: Report into the death of Alexander Litvinenko*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-litvinenko-inquiry-report-into-the-death-of-alexander-litvinenko>.

The UK voted to leave the EU five months later, in June 2016. During the remainder of the fourth phase a new Conservative government, headed by Theresa May from July, was consumed by the tumultuous domestic consequences of the referendum. Relations with Russia became a lower-priority issue, although the annual National Security Capability Reviews (NSCRs), which reported in 2016, 2018 and 2019 on the implementation of the 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the SDSR, continued to emphasize the threat that Russia posed.

In the fifth phase, which started in March 2018, the bilateral relationship crashed to its lowest point in decades. Sergey Skripal, a former officer in Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU, who had been granted UK citizenship, was poisoned with a Russian-made nerve agent in Salisbury, together with his daughter. The attack was assumed to be an attempt on the Skripals' lives. (Three other UK citizens were to come into contact with the nerve agent, one of whom later died.) The UK responded much more sharply than it had to the murder of Litvinenko, expelling 23 intelligence officers from Russia's embassy in London (this formed part of an action, coordinated with partners, in which about 150 Russian intelligence officers were removed from embassies in 26 countries). Senior contacts were suspended, and border and counter-intelligence measures tightened. Russia responded with equal severity. In early September the UK police identified two GRU officers as suspects in the attack.

The 2018 NSCR, published in late March, unsurprisingly judged the Russian threat to have intensified: the Salisbury attack was 'an unlawful use of force against the UK' that followed 'a well-established pattern of Russian State aggression.'<sup>16</sup> Moreover, both the 2018 and 2019 NSCRs presented Russian actions as part of a broader assault on the rules-based international order.<sup>17</sup> All three NSCRs stressed the importance for the UK of allies, particularly the US, France, Germany and other NATO members; the need for an all-government response (the so-called Fusion Doctrine); and a continued commitment to European security, including a strong post-Brexit defence and security partnership with the EU.<sup>18</sup>

Since the Salisbury attack, top-level in-person political contact with Russia has virtually ceased.<sup>19</sup> Officials engage behind the scenes, and confidential channels of communication remain in place. The sides have rebuilt their embassy staffs, which were shredded by reciprocal expulsions in 2018. Networks of non-government ties still exist, including through the sizeable and sometimes well-connected Russian diaspora in the UK. Economic relations have been largely immune to political

---

<sup>16</sup> HM Government (2018), *National Security Capability Review*, London: The Stationery Office Limited, pp. 2 and 6, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/705347/6.4391\\_CO\\_National-Security-Review\\_web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> HM Government (2019), *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: Third Annual Report*, London: The Stationery Office Limited, pp. 32–36, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/819613/NSS\\_and\\_SDSR\\_2015\\_Third\\_Annual\\_Report\\_-\\_FINAL\\_\\_2\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819613/NSS_and_SDSR_2015_Third_Annual_Report_-_FINAL__2_.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–31.

<sup>19</sup> UK and Russian leaders have met just twice since March 2018. Theresa May, then UK prime minister, met Putin at the G20 summit in Japan in June 2019. Her successor, Boris Johnson, met Putin on the sidelines of a multilateral summit in Berlin to discuss the situation in Libya in January 2020. The authors are grateful to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for confirming the dates of these meetings.

turbulence but are not of major significance.<sup>20</sup> Cultural, sports and educational exchanges continue. Until the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions, thousands of UK and Russian tourists visited each other's countries. The political relationship is, however, broken.

## Russian views of the UK

Russian views of the UK are an important part of this story. First, Russian policymakers consider the UK to be a hostile power. This viewpoint was vividly expressed in January 2019, when Patrushev (by then secretary of the Security Council of Russia) branded the UK the 'standard bearer' of an anti-Russian campaign waged by the West.<sup>21</sup> In this version of events, the UK bases its foreign policy on its relationships with the US and US-led organizations, fomenting instability in Russia, championing NATO's enlargement and seeking to pull countries such as Ukraine out of Russia's sphere of influence. In 2016, one Russian commentator described the UK as 'Russia's toughest opponent' within the EU.<sup>22</sup> Nor did Russian analysts expect relations to improve after Brexit. In the words of one: 'The nature of Russian–British relations will probably not change much. They were also uneven before Britain joined the EEC in 1973.'<sup>23</sup> Russia, observed a third commentator in 2018, was one of the UK's 'main foreign policy opponents'.<sup>24</sup> An issue that angers Moscow is the number of political opponents of the current regime who have settled in London, some of whom have been given political asylum. Because it allegedly enables them to operate with impunity abroad, this is seen as interference in Russia's internal affairs.<sup>25</sup>

Second, however, Moscow clearly regards the UK as a lesser power than Russia – a long-standing perception that UK decision-makers have consistently underappreciated. Revealingly, successive Russian foreign policy concepts, which provide snapshots of how Russian policymakers see the world and their country's place in it,<sup>26</sup> barely mention the UK. When discussing cooperation with leading EU member states, the 2008 version sniffed that 'Russia would like the potential

---

<sup>20</sup> In the year to 30 June 2021 UK–Russia trade in goods and services was £14.6 billion (£4.2 billion UK exports and £10.4 billion UK imports), just 1.2 per cent of the UK's total trade turnover. In 2019 Russia accounted for £12.3 billion of the UK's outward stock of foreign direct investment (FDI), 0.8 per cent of the total; the inward stock of FDI in the UK from Russia stood at just £655 million. See Department for International Trade (2022), 'Trade and Investment Factsheets: Russia', 21 January 2022, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1048563/russia-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2022-01-21.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1048563/russia-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2022-01-21.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Yegorov, I. (2019), 'Патрушев: Британские власти стали знаменосцами антироссийской кампании' [Patrushev: British authorities are standard-bearers of anti-Russian campaign], *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 15 January 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/01/15/patrushev-britanskie-vlasti-stali-znamenoscami-antirossijskoj-kampanii.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Kapitonova, N. K. (2016), 'Отношения Великобритании с партнёрами в свете референдума о членстве в ЕС' [Great Britain's relations with its partners in light of the referendum on membership of the EU], in Gromyko, A. A., Ananieva, E. V., Boiko, Y. A., Zhurkin, V. V., Nosov, M. G. and Fedorov, V. P. (eds) (2016), *Референдум о членстве Британии в Евросоюзе: ход, итоги и последствия* [The referendum on British membership of the European Union: the course of events, results and consequences], Moscow: IE RAN, p. 10, <https://www.instituteofeurope.ru/images/uploads/doklad/331.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Ananieva, E. V. (2016), 'Брекзит: голосовали сердцем' [Brexit: they voted with their hearts], *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn* [International Affairs], 7, <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/1704>.

<sup>24</sup> Andreyeva, T. (2018), 'Приоритеты и способы обеспечения безопасности Великобритании в связи с брекзитом' [Priorities and methods of achieving the security of Great Britain in connection with Brexit], *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn* [International Affairs], 10, <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/2088>.

<sup>25</sup> Kramarenko, A. (2018), 'О чем говорит визит в Москву министра иностранных дел Великобритании Б. Джонсона?' [What does the visit to Moscow by Great Britain's foreign minister B. Johnson tell us?], *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn* [International Affairs], 10, <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/1961>. The author was minister-counsellor at Russia's embassy in London from 1999 to 2004 and again (with ambassadorial rank) from 2011 to 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Approximate UK equivalents would be the National Security Strategies and Strategic Defence and Security Reviews.



of engagement with Great Britain to be realized along similar lines.<sup>27</sup> The next version, in 2013, reiterated the same underwhelmed formula, word for word.<sup>28</sup> (That year Putin's press spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, reportedly described the UK in the margins of the G20 summit in St Petersburg as 'a small island that no one pays attention to'.<sup>29</sup>) The 2016, and most recent, concept ignored the UK altogether.<sup>30</sup>

Russian policymakers recognize that the UK has important attributes, in that it is: like Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and a leading member of other multilateral organizations and formats; a nuclear weapons state; the second largest military spender in NATO; alongside France, one of only two significant military powers in western Europe; and the possessor of one of the largest economies in the world.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, its enjoyment of close relations with the US (in certain spheres) is recognized, as is its deployment of capable diplomatic and intelligence services. Yet, from a Russian perspective, the UK is unable to run an autonomous foreign policy – unlike Russia. Interviewed in 2018, Andrey Kokoshin (a former first deputy defence minister and secretary of the Security Council of Russia, and a seasoned security policy thinker) summed up mainstream Russian thinking thus:

[The] role of this country is relatively small. Great Britain's weight in the world is, it is apparent, less than during the time of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it appears as one of the great powers, but in reality, I think, its weight in world politics puts it behind India, its former colony, or for example Germany, with its financial-economic and technological resources, and its special role in the European Union.<sup>32</sup>

Third, the UK's 'special relationship' with the US, which UK governments consider one of its greatest strengths, is seen in Moscow as a symptom of weakness. In 2005 an experienced UK-watcher offered this judgment:

The 'special relationship' [...] preserves its attractiveness for the political leadership of Great Britain. By exploiting the wish of the Americans to appeal to their junior allies for assistance to achieve their aims, British prime ministers have been able to participate in key global events more often than the international weight of their country alone would have allowed.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> President of the Russian Federation/kremlin.ru (2008), 'Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации' [Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation], 15 July 2008, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>.

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2013), 'Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации' [Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation], 12 February 2013, <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/70218094>.

<sup>29</sup> Osborn, A. (2013), 'Britain's Cameron embroiled in "small island" row with Russia', Reuters, 6 September 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-g20-britain-russia-idUSBRE9850QH20130906>.

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2016), 'Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации' [Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation], 30 November 2016, <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/71452062>.

<sup>31</sup> In nominal terms, in 2020 the UK's total GDP was estimated at \$2.76 trillion compared with Russia's \$1.48 trillion, placing them fifth and 11th, respectively, in the World Bank's rankings. In purchasing power parity terms (current international \$), Russia's GDP was estimated at \$4.13 trillion in 2020 (placing it in sixth place) and the UK's at \$3.08 trillion (10th). Data from the World Bank Open Data website, <https://data.worldbank.org> (accessed 13 Jan. 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Asatryan, G. (2018), '«Вес Великобритании в мировой политике меньше ее бывшей колонии»' [Great Britain's weight in world politics less than its former colony], *Izvestiya*, 23 March 2018, <https://iz.ru/721773/georgii-asatryan/ves-velikobritanii-v-mirovoi-politike-menshe-ee-byvshei-kolonii>.

<sup>33</sup> Gromyko, A. (2005), 'Внешняя политика Великобритании: от империи к «осевой державе»' [The foreign policy of Great Britain: from empire to 'axial' power], *Polit.ru*, 17 May 2005, <https://polit.ru/article/2005/05/17/britain/print>.

In effect, Russian analysts argue, the UK has tried to offset its waning influence by positioning itself as an outrider of the US, rallying NATO's European members (and, before 2016, the EU) behind US policies to augment its own influence in Washington. A group of Russian commentators argued in 2015 that 'Moscow not unreasonably perceives London to be merely the communicator of American initiatives.'<sup>34</sup> Commenting on Theresa May's visit to Washington, DC, in January 2017, days after the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president, another observer detected a UK desire 'to play the role of global actor, ready to carry out all possible missions across the world jointly with the USA.'<sup>35</sup> In 2020 Russia's ambassador to the UK, Andrey Kelin, observed that: 'Really, here in London, there has evolved a very powerful pro-American lobby that intentionally goes along with everything that Washington does, and this implies antagonizing relations with Russia.'<sup>36</sup>

## **Russian analysts argue that the UK has tried to offset its waning influence by positioning itself as an outrider of the US, rallying NATO's European members behind US policies to augment its own influence in Washington.**

Finally, Russian leaders view UK governments as duplicitous. For the Kremlin, the refusal to extradite Berezovsky exemplified this trait, because it came eight days after the signing of the TNK-BP deal, which Putin had personally authorized.<sup>37</sup> Putin seems to have concluded that he had been deceived:<sup>38</sup> from his perspective, he might reasonably have expected Blair to return the favour. Their personal relationship, central to the improvement in relations during the preceding three years, never recovered. The UK government's protestations that its hands were tied would have seemed absurd and disingenuous to Russian policymakers – how could a court overrule a sovereign political authority? Elsewhere, Russian analysts accuse UK leaders of whipping up anti-Russian sentiment to mask divisions over Brexit or to strengthen NATO unity.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Foreign Policy Agency (2015), 'И не друг, и не враг' [Neither friend nor foe], *Lenta.ru*, 2 March 2015, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/03/02/russiauk>.

<sup>35</sup> Andreyeva, T. N. (2018), 'Британо-американские «особые отношения» на начальном этапе Брекзита' [The British-American 'special relationship' in the initial stage of Brexit], ИММО RAN, 13 September 2018, p. 2, [https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/ru/articles/2018/13092018\\_Andreeva.pdf](https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/ru/articles/2018/13092018_Andreeva.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Pudovkin, E. (2020), 'Посол в Великобритании – РБК: «Лондон не готов возобновлять отношения»' [Ambassador to Great Britain tells RBC: 'London not ready to renew relations with Russia'], *RBC*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/23/07/2020/5f17fbf69a7947b6f7607df8>.

<sup>37</sup> Gustafson, T. (2012), *Wheel of Fortune: The Battle for Oil and Power in Russia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 423–24.

<sup>38</sup> Zygar, M. (2016), *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin*, New York: PublicAffairs, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Vilovatykh, A. V. (2017), 'Военная политика Великобритании: фактор Brexit' [The military policy of Great Britain: the Brexit factor], *Оборона и Безопасность* [Defence and Security], 27 December 2017, pp. 136–37, <https://riss.ru/documents/665/1168240a9dcf4c0c9e5e83a6da2322d7.pdf>.

One commentator captured Russian views of the UK in 2015 thus: ‘To many in Moscow, the UK is an irritating junior partner of the United States, largely alienated from the rest of Europe and with little independent influence in international affairs.’<sup>40</sup> For Russian observers, Brexit confirms this unflattering assessment.

## The impact of Brexit on the UK: Russian views

The Kremlin’s attitude towards Brexit at the time of the referendum remains a subject of debate. In the run-up to the vote its public position was one of neutrality. Russian expert opinion was divided between those who favoured Brexit, because it promised to remove a confrontational member state from the EU, and those who worried that it would set off wider uncertainty in Europe.<sup>41</sup> There are differing views about the extent to which Russia tried to influence the outcome of the poll and, if it did try, how much impact Russian activity had. According to the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee (DCMSC), the Russian ambassador to the UK at the time, Aleksandr Yakovenko, and his staff – at least one of whom was subsequently expelled as an intelligence officer – held several meetings with the leading funder of one of the main pro-Brexit campaigns, Leave.EU. The Russian state-controlled media outlets RT and Sputnik also broadcast a large number of anti-EU items during the referendum campaign.<sup>42</sup> Remarkably, the UK government has rejected calls for an official investigation of these questions. That is highly regrettable: even if an inquiry concluded that the impact of Russian activity was negligible, it would provide reassurance and help to draw a line under the matter.

However divided Russian observers were before the referendum, the consensus among them in its aftermath has been that Brexit is weakening the UK and its international influence. Russian policymakers have long been contemptuous of the EU as a geopolitical actor, shown by the disrespectful treatment of Josep Borrell (High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) when he visited Moscow in February 2021.<sup>43</sup> But they know that the EU amplifies its members’ voices in areas such as trade policy, where it is a giant in global terms. When the EU27 can agree (which they sometimes cannot) on sanctions against Russia or support for the EU’s eastern neighbours, notably Ukraine, the impact is much greater than if member states act separately and in an uncoordinated fashion. Even if a future UK government decides to work more closely with the EU on foreign and security policy than currently foreseen, Russian commentators understand that Brexit greatly weakens the UK’s ability to shape the bloc’s actions, shifting the centre of gravity in the EU towards countries, including France and Germany, whose leaders advocate more accommodating policies towards Russia.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Lo, B. (2015), *Russia and the New World Disorder*, London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, and Baltimore, MD: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 190–91.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Ananieva, E. (2016), ‘What Brexit means for Russia’, *Russia Direct*, 20 June 2016, <https://russia-direct.org/opinion/what-brexit-means-russia>; and Kostyuk, R. (2016), ‘How the Russian political elite view Brexit’, *Russia Direct*, 29 June 2016, <https://russia-direct.org/opinion/how-russian-political-elite-view-brexit>.

<sup>42</sup> UK House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2019), *Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Final Report – Eighth Report of Session 2017–19*, pp. 70 and 74–76, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmcds/1791/1791.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Lukyanov, F. (2021), ‘EU-Russia Relations: What Went Wrong?’, Carnegie Moscow Center, 26 February 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83945>.

<sup>44</sup> Rodkiewicz, W. (2016), ‘Russia on Brexit: calculating the benefits’, *OSW Analyses*, 29 June 2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-06-29/russia-brexit-calculating-benefits>.

Consequently, Russian analysts judge that without a compelling alternative to EU membership, Brexit reinforces the UK's strategic decline.<sup>45</sup> As one of them wrote in 2020:

The complex negotiations on withdrawal from the European Union and the drawn-out political crisis inside the [United Kingdom] have significantly affected London's international image: the mass media have again started to call Great Britain 'the sick man of Europe'.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, and most damaging in terms of the effect on Russian perceptions, Brexit has highlighted and aggravated divisions within the UK – between and across political groups, regions and generations. In the words of one Russian UK-watcher, 'Brexit is now the main dividing line in the United Kingdom, having relegated the confrontation along the left-right horizontal political spectrum to a secondary position without eliminating it [...] Brexit has caused a most profound political crisis in Britain.'<sup>47</sup> According to another, 'one cannot exclude the break-up of the United Kingdom as a consequence of the independence of Scotland and the reunification of Ireland by the end of the 2020s.'<sup>48</sup>

## UK–Russia relations: four lessons

The recent history of UK–Russia relations offers four important lessons. In the first place, with virtually no shared values and few convergent interests, the foundations of the relationship are fragile at the best of times. As will be seen from the analysis that follows, UK and Russian decision-makers disagree about most international security issues, and understand normative concepts such as rule of law, democracy, human rights and state sovereignty very differently. A modest economic relationship throws these contested political issues further into relief. Consequently, UK–Russia relations are prone to sharp swings (one analyst has described them as 'pendulum-like').<sup>49</sup> In the mid-2000s relations collapsed from a post-Cold War high (Putin's 2003 state visit) to what was then a post-Cold War low (the Litvinenko murder) in little more than three years.

Secondly, the largely adversarial nature of the UK–Russia relationship since 2000 accords with the longer historical pattern. A former UK ambassador to the Soviet Union has noted: 'At some of the turning points of European history [the UK and

---

<sup>45</sup> On this point, see the sceptical comments by Russian analysts about the concept of 'Global Britain', which successive UK governments have propounded. For example, Godovanyuk, K. A. (2020), «Глобальная Британия» в преддверии брекзита [Global Britain in the run-up to Brexit], Moscow: IE RAN, pp. 18–26, <https://www.instituteofeurope.ru/images/uploads/doklad/373.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>47</sup> Ananieva, E. V. (2020), 'Политическая ситуация в Великобритании: внутри- и межпартийная борьба. Итоги правления Терезы Мэй' [The political situation in Great Britain: the intra- and inter-party struggle. Results of the rule of Theresa May], in Gromyko, A. A., Ananieva, E. V., Boiko, Yu. A., Zhurkin, V. V., Nosov, M. G. and Fedorov, V. P. (eds) (2020), *Итоги правления Терезы Мэй* [Results of the rule of Theresa May], Moscow: IE RAN, p. 31, <https://www.instituteofeurope.ru/images/uploads/doklad/364.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Kuznetsov, A. V. (2017), 'Последствия Брекзита для Британии и ЕС' [The consequences of Brexit for Britain and the EU] in Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences (IE RAN) (2017), *Экономические аспекты Брекзита* [Economic Aspects of Brexit], Moscow: IE RAN, p. 25, <http://www.instituteofeurope.ru/images/uploads/doklad/345.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> Sergeev, E. Y. (2016), 'Российско-британские отношения: исторический опыт, проблемы и перспективы' [Russo-British relations: historical experience, problems and perspectives], in Gromyko et al. (eds) (2016), *Референдум о членстве Британии в Евросоюзе* [The referendum on British membership of the European Union], p. 60. See also Pravda, A. (1990), 'Introduction', in Pravda, A. and Duncan, P. (eds) (1990), *Soviet-British Relations since the 1970s*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 13, which describes the historical pattern as 'oscillation between distant coolness, friction and some degree of warmth'.

Russia] found themselves in alliance, but there were long periods of low-level friction, mutual distaste and occasional hostility.<sup>50</sup> Confrontation is not inevitable, but this historical legacy means that UK and Russian policymakers typically regard each other with caution and suspicion.

**For leaders in Moscow, Russia is a great power alongside the US and China in a ‘multipolar’ or ‘polycentric’ world. By contrast, the UK is viewed as a second-level power that does not treat Russia with due respect. Seen from London, Russia is a major power, but is flawed and less influential than it thinks.**

Relations are also complicated by the two sides’ self-aggrandizing views of themselves. For leaders in Moscow, Russia is a great power alongside the US and China in a ‘multipolar’ or ‘polycentric’ world. By contrast, the UK is viewed as a second-level power that does not treat Russia with due respect. Seen from London, Russia is a major power, but is flawed and less influential than it thinks. For their part, most post-war UK leaders have exaggerated the UK’s stature and influence, including with Russian counterparts, even though no Russian leader has considered the UK to be Russia’s equal since the first half of the 1940s. Consequently, it is assumed in London that Russia takes the UK more seriously than it does. Mismatched perceptions cause misunderstanding and frustration in both capitals.

Finally, the UK–Russia relationship is buffeted by forces beyond the control of the UK authorities. In the mid-2000s it deteriorated partly because of instability in several of Russia’s post-Soviet neighbours, and partly because of mounting friction between Russia and the US.

### **UK–Russia relations: a less forgiving global context**

Three wider trends will affect the UK’s ability to deal with Russia in the 2020s.<sup>51</sup> In the first place, the Western-centric order created at the end of the Second World War is weakening. The US is shifting its focus away from Europe, towards Asia. There has been a resurgence of state-based security threats, including from Russia. Russia’s internal deficiencies may eventually threaten its global pretensions, although

<sup>50</sup> Keeble, C. (2000), *Britain, the Soviet Union and Russia*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, p. 4. See also Light, M. (1990), ‘Anglo-Soviet relations: political and diplomatic’, in Pravda and Duncan (1990), *Soviet-British Relations since the 1970s*, p. 130.

<sup>51</sup> This section draws on Clarke, M. and Ramscar, H. (2020), *Tipping Point: Britain, Brexit and Security in the 2020s*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 17–100.

that is far from certain.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, it is more confident and assertive abroad than at any time since 2000. Its leaders believe that a US-led system is giving way to a multipolar model, with Russia part of its great power hub.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, more than a decade of economic crisis across the world has fed sovereign and private sector indebtedness, populism and protectionism. The global economy of the 2020s will be more fragmented than it was during the two decades following the end of the Cold War. The centre of economic gravity is returning to Asia, with China once more at the core, as it was until the Industrial Revolution. Again, it is uncertain how much Russia, which is stuck in its own low-growth equilibrium, will benefit. Movement towards global decarbonization also raises doubts about the sustainability of Russia's model of political economy, founded on the recycling of hydrocarbon rents.<sup>54</sup> But these will be difficult times for the UK, a medium-sized power now outside the world's largest economic bloc and advocating freer trade just when political and populist resistance to the concept is on the rise in many countries.

Thirdly, Western liberal democracy has sustained severe reputational damage, particularly since the financial crisis that began in 2008. Brexit epitomized the resultant backlashes against established institutions, parties and leaders, as well as opposition to the impact of globalization on societies and identities. Authoritarian forms of government have spread and consolidated in much of the world. The long-term vitality of Russia's political system is highly questionable, but its leaders have concluded that Western liberalism is in retreat, having 'outlived its purpose', as Putin claimed in 2019.<sup>55</sup>

UK–Russia relations are therefore at an impasse. Underlying dynamics suggest that they will not become more cooperative in the foreseeable future; if they do, they are unlikely to stabilize at a higher level for long. Russian decision-makers consider the UK to be both a lesser power than Russia and in decline. They judge that Brexit is further diminishing it, politically and economically, possibly to the point of territorial disintegration. In addition, the UK finds itself in an increasingly disorderly world that, rightly or wrongly, Russia's leaders believe is undermining the West.

How should the UK build policy towards Russia in these unpropitious circumstances? The next section addresses that question.

---

<sup>52</sup> On this point, see Kofman, M. and Kendall-Taylor, A. (2021), 'The Myth of Russian Decline: Why Moscow Will Be a Persistent Power', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021, pp. 142–52; and Mankoff, J. (2021), 'Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition', *The Washington Quarterly*, 44(3), pp. 107–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970905>.

<sup>53</sup> Lo, B. (2021), 'Russia and the Global Order', in Šrāders, S. and Veebel, V. (eds) (2021), *The Russia Conference Papers 2021*, The Baltic Defence College, Tartu, Estonia: University of Tartu Press, pp. 147–55, <https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/RusConfPapers.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> Connolly, R., Hanson, P. and Bradshaw, M. (2020), 'It's déjà vu all over again: COVID-19, the global energy market, and the Russian economy', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61(4–5), pp. 511–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1776627>; and Bradshaw, M., Van de Graaf, T. and Connolly, R. (2019), 'Preparing for the new oil order? Saudi Arabia and Russia', *Energy Strategy Reviews*, 26, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esr.2019.100374>.

<sup>55</sup> Barber, L., Foy, H. and Barker, A. (2019), 'Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete'', *Financial Times*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>. This remark should be qualified. The Kremlin remains deeply concerned about what it sees as the ability and intention of Western liberal democracies, led by the US, to foment political instability in Russia.

## UK policy towards Russia: some strategic guidelines

There is no published strategic overview of UK policy towards Russia. As noted, the UK government's 2021 Integrated Review characterizes Russia as 'the most acute direct threat to the UK'. It goes on to state that until relations improve, the UK will 'deter and defend' against threats from Russia,<sup>56</sup> but that hardly constitutes a strategy. The cross-Whitehall Russia Strategy, finalized in 2017, remains classified, though there have been fragmentary public references to it.<sup>57</sup> Responding to the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee's (ISC) Russia report in 2020, the government said that the Russia Strategy took a 30-year perspective, 'designed in the long-term to move from a relationship of confrontation and challenge, which currently threatens our collective security and values, to a relationship where Russia chooses to work alongside the international community.'<sup>58</sup>

Whether that ambitious objective is an aspiration or an operating assumption was left unsaid. If it is an aspiration, it prompts many questions. How likely is such an outcome? How, and to what extent, can a post-Brexit UK make it happen? What are the UK's Russia-related interests? How are they prioritized? If, however, the government's response describes an operating assumption – that this is the direction of travel, and that relations with Russia are likely to move slowly towards cooperation – it is dangerously optimistic, even naïve.

Instead of aspiration or optimism, a coherent strategy should be based on clear assessments of:

- The likely trajectory of UK–Russia relations;
- The UK's Russia-relevant interests, prioritized rigorously;
- Whether these interests are compatible with Russia's; and
- The instruments available to the UK to defend and promote these interests.

### The likely trajectory of UK–Russia relations

Without an assessment of the likely direction of bilateral relations, any discussion of UK policy towards Russia is detached from reality. Judging by Russia's latest National Security Strategy, the Kremlin takes a bleak view of the outlook for relations with the West. In this version, the leading Western powers remain determined to marginalize and weaken Russia: interfering in its internal affairs, subjecting it to economic and other pressures, and challenging its vital interests. In response, Russia must continue to strengthen its capabilities – securing domestic stability, augmenting its military power, and modernizing its economy – and its ties with

<sup>56</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, p. 61.

<sup>57</sup> For example, Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), *Russia*, HC 632, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, pp. 25–29, [https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207\\_CCS0221966010-001\\_Russia-Report-v02-Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207_CCS0221966010-001_Russia-Report-v02-Web_Accessible.pdf). As a result, it is known that the Strategy is organized into five 'pillars': 'Protect', 'Constrain', 'Engage', 'Keep Open' and 'Build'.

<sup>58</sup> HM Government (2020), *Government Response to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament Report 'Russia'*, p. 5, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/902342/HMG\\_Russia\\_Response\\_web\\_accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/902342/HMG_Russia_Response_web_accessible.pdf).

non-Western countries.<sup>59</sup> In the words of an experienced Russia-watcher, ‘There’s no reason to anticipate any early change in Moscow’s combative and truculent approach to relations with the West. Instead, Russia is doubling down.’<sup>60</sup>

Accordingly, UK decision-makers should plan on the assumption that bilateral relations will remain largely adversarial for the foreseeable future – certainly under the current Russian leadership and, quite possibly, its successor(s). This judgment is consistent with a relationship whose foundations are fragile and with the sides’ discordant world views. It also reflects the perception of Russian policymakers that the UK is a hostile but lesser power, which Brexit is weakening further. The UK should certainly pursue dialogue with Russia where possible and if doing so serves its interests, but it ought to assume that the principal motivation for engagement will be to manage differences.

### **The UK’s Russia-relevant interests**

The UK’s Russia-relevant interests can be grouped under five subheadings:

#### **The protection of UK territory, citizens and institutions**

The likelihood of a Russian military attack on the UK is very low, although it is likelier than it was a decade ago that the UK could, in an emergency, be drawn into armed conflict with Russia in Eastern Europe. More immediate problems are the Russian state organs and associated entities that threaten certain UK citizens (and Russian citizens resident in the UK); and the integrity of the UK’s democratic, law-based institutions. The main dangers are assassinations, espionage, cyber-enabled attacks on critical national infrastructure, exposure to corruption and disruptive information warfare.

#### **Security in the Euro-Atlantic space**

Being the part of the world in which the bilateral relationship largely plays out, the Euro-Atlantic space will remain the most important region for the UK’s Russia policy. The UK should champion the core principles of the 1990 Charter of Paris – democratic choice and fundamental freedoms; human rights; and sovereignty – as the building blocks of European security.<sup>61</sup> These precepts are as valid today as then.

---

<sup>59</sup> President of the Russian Federation (2021), *Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.07.2021 г. No. 400 ‘О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации’* [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 02.07.2021 No. 400 ‘On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation’], <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046>.

<sup>60</sup> Hill, I. (2021), ‘Russia’s National Security Strategy: Same book, new cover’, *The Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute, 19 July 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russia-s-national-security-strategy-same-book-new-cover>.

<sup>61</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (1990), *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, <https://www.osce.org/mc/39516>. The Charter also refers to the importance of ‘equal security for all our countries’, and asserts that: ‘Security is indivisible and the security of every participating State is inseparably linked to that of all the others.’ Russian policymakers cite these elliptical phrases in support of their opposition to NATO enlargement and, implicitly, their claim that Russia has ‘privileged’ interests, particularly as regards its neighbours. As a whole, however, the Charter is weighted overwhelmingly in favour of the principles of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and sovereign choice, and enshrines explicitly ‘the freedom of States to choose their own security arrangements’ – a phrase which Russia glosses over.



### **Wider international issues**

As regards Russia, these include: security outside the Euro-Atlantic space, particularly the Middle East, North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean; proliferation, especially of weapons of mass destruction; counterterrorism and counter-piracy; and climate change. As permanent members of the UNSC, the UK and Russia will be involved in discussion of various global security and governance issues. But they are unlikely to come into conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, East and Southeast Asia, Latin America or Australasia unless Russian actions there affect the interests of a UK ally or partner.

### **Economic relations**

Despite the hopes of UK leaders since the early 1920s, trade with, and investment in, Russia are likely to remain of limited importance to the UK. Certain UK exporters will continue to benefit from a large consumer market, particularly in Russia's urban centres, but large new UK direct investments (similar to those made by BP and Shell) will be exceptional, if they materialize at all. Russia will remain a source of business for niche sectors in the UK, including high-end residential property, legal services and wealth management. A pressing national security issue for the UK is the threat posed by illicit financial flows from Russia (and elsewhere).

### **People-to-people connections**

Allowing for security considerations (which will, for example, ensure that Russian citizens continue to require UK entry visas), the UK has an interest in promoting educational, scientific, sporting and tourism links with Russia. These aid mutual understanding, and underline that the UK's problems are with Russia's leaders and some of their policies, not with the Russian people; such links also create commercial opportunities.

### **Are UK interests compatible with those of Russia?**

How should policymakers defend and promote these interests, given the state of the UK–Russia relationship? Answering that question requires a discussion as to whether UK interests converge with, diverge from, or clash with Russia's.

As regards the defence of the UK and Euro-Atlantic security, UK interests will almost certainly be in conflict with Russia's for the foreseeable future. In these areas, the chances of a cooperative bilateral relationship will remain exceptionally low.

The Russian state's record of targeted murderous attacks on UK citizens marks it as a continuing threat, particularly when the Russian authorities have responded to overwhelming evidence of their involvement with brazen denials and obfuscation. Russian espionage, cyber-enabled attacks, information warfare and use of corruption to infiltrate and undermine parts of the British establishment do not pose the same physical threat to individuals, but they do endanger the UK's democratic institutions. As the ISC's Russia report stated, any threat to the UK's democracy 'must be treated as a serious national security threat by those tasked with defending us'.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), *Russia*, p. 12.

Similarly, the UK and Russia understand the bases of European security in very different ways.<sup>63</sup> Contrary to the core principles of the Charter of Paris, Russia seeks special privileges for itself: a veto over continental security initiatives and a sphere of influence around its borders. At the end of 2021 Russia presented the US with a draft bilateral treaty between the US and Russia and a draft agreement between NATO and Russia, both designed to limit the security options of Russia's neighbours.<sup>64</sup> Russia is demanding an undertaking from the US not to allow former Soviet states to accede to NATO, and not to develop bilateral military co-operation with such states. It also wants allied forces deployed on the territory of other NATO nations since May 1997 to be withdrawn, and an undertaking from NATO members not to conduct any military activity in Eastern Europe (including Ukraine), the South Caucasus or Central Asia. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Grushko warned that if NATO did not take Russia's proposals seriously, it would have to deal with a 'military technical alternative'.<sup>65</sup> It is difficult to see how such basic differences between Russia and the UK (and other Western countries) over European security can be bridged.

**The gulf between the UK and Russia will get even wider in the next ten years if Russia's political system becomes still more authoritarian, as is probable. Cooperation over certain high-profile regional conflicts and counterterrorism also seems unlikely, given the two sides' divergent stances.**

On wider global issues, the picture is mixed. The UK may want to discuss strengthening the rules-based international order, yet it should recognize that its understanding of this term differs radically from Russia's.<sup>66</sup> The Integrated Review speaks of 'an international order in which open societies and economies continue to flourish', promising that the UK intends to 'increase [its] efforts to protect open societies and democratic values where they are being undermined; and to seek good governance and create shared rules in frontiers such as cyberspace and space'.<sup>67</sup> That is so different from the Russian leadership's conception, which prioritizes authoritarian state order, as to exclude or stymie cooperation, particularly over human rights and fundamental freedoms. Indeed, the gulf between the UK and

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of Russian views, see Menkiszak, M. (2019), *A Strategic Continuation, A Tactical Change: Russia's European security policy*, Point of View Number 76, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2019-11-08/a-strategic-continuation-a-tactical-change>.

<sup>64</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2021), 'О российских проектах документов по обеспечению правовых гарантий безопасности со стороны США и НАТО' [On the Russian draft documents regarding the provision of legal guarantees of security by the USA and NATO], 17 December 2021, [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1790809](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1790809).

<sup>65</sup> Plakuchev, G. (2021), '«У опасной черты»'. Москва заявила, что в отношениях с НАТО наступил «момент истины» [At a dangerous line'. Moscow has declared that 'the moment of truth' has arrived in relations with NATO], *Gazeta.ru*, 18 December 2021, [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2021/12/18\\_a\\_14331211.shtml?updated](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2021/12/18_a_14331211.shtml?updated).

<sup>66</sup> For a general discussion, see Chalmers, M. (2019), *Which Rules? Why There Is No Single 'Rules-Based International System'*, RUSI Occasional Papers, London: Royal United Services Institute, [https://static.rusi.org/201905\\_op\\_which\\_rules\\_why\\_there\\_is\\_no\\_single\\_rules\\_based\\_international\\_system\\_web.pdf](https://static.rusi.org/201905_op_which_rules_why_there_is_no_single_rules_based_international_system_web.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, p. 6 and pp. 11–12.

Russia on these issues will get even wider in the next ten years if Russia's political system becomes still more authoritarian, as is probable. Cooperation over certain high-profile regional conflicts (e.g. Syria) and counterterrorism also seems unlikely, given the two sides' divergent stances.<sup>68</sup>

Elsewhere, limited cooperation with Russia is conceivable. Despite bilateral tensions and friction in broader relations between Russia and the West, the UK and Russia worked together on counterproliferation, particularly as regards the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which sought to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. UK and Russian naval forces also cooperated in countering piracy in the Gulf of Aden. In early 2022 efforts to revive the JCPOA were still making little progress, and piracy in the Gulf of Aden was much less of a problem than previously; but at some point the UK and Russia will probably find themselves on the same side in tackling conflicts on the UNSC agenda, particularly if neither has significant interests at stake. Nonetheless, if the possibilities for cooperation are greater outside Europe than in it, they are still modest. Climate change is often mooted as an area for such cooperation, yet Russia's profile as a major hydrocarbons producer and the relative lack of importance that it attaches to climate policy may make it hard for it to find common ground with Western countries.<sup>69</sup>

Commercial interaction is a shared interest, although UK governments take the view that, ultimately, this is a matter for private companies. Tighter supervision of the UK's financial and related industries would, however, entail a cost that the UK should pay in the interests of national security. Russia might encourage the UK to engage with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a trade interlocutor (the EAEU includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, supposedly as an equivalent to the EU). The UK should avoid any discussion that could be interpreted as endorsing Russia's claims to a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, or that cuts across the interests of the EAEU's other members.<sup>70</sup> There is, however, low-key working-level technical cooperation between the EU and the EAEU that the UK might replicate.

In most cases, therefore, the UK should not expect to promote its Russia-relevant interests through cooperation with Russia. Much of the bilateral relationship will remain adversarial, particularly when it comes to protecting UK citizens and domestic institutions, and defending the UK's security interests in Europe. The main tasks in these areas will be to deter hostile Russian action, build greater domestic resilience and, in Europe, manage differences. In this regard, it will be essential for the UK to continue talking to Russia by means of official and unofficial channels, both bilaterally and in conjunction with partners. But – to the extent that this is possible

<sup>68</sup> Cooperation on counterterrorism would also require UK re-engagement with the FSB. In 2007, as part of the post-Litvinenko retaliatory measures imposed on Russia by the then Labour government, official contacts with the FSB were suspended. The ban was temporarily lifted to enable cooperation in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 football World Cup. On each occasion it was subsequently reimposed, and it remains in force.

<sup>69</sup> Mitrova, T. (2021), 'Is Russia Finally Ready to Tackle Climate Change?', Carnegie Moscow Center, 27 July 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/85043>; and Gustafson, T. (2021), *Klimat: Russia in the Age of Climate Change*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 17–47. In October 2021, Russia announced a net zero emissions target date of 2060 – ten years later than the UK, US or EU.

<sup>70</sup> An additional problem for the UK in engaging with the EAEU is the fact that Belarus is not a member of the World Trade Organization. In any case, since 2014 Russia has lost interest in trade liberalization in favour of import substitution, partly in response to Western sanctions.

and has impact – the main objective should be to improve mutual understanding, thus clarifying what it is that divides the sides, and how tensions might be managed and alleviated – even if the underlying causes remain unresolved, as is probable.

## **The policy instruments available to the UK**

The policy tools at the UK's disposal fall into three categories: state power; soft power (often independent or semi-independent of the state); and partnerships with third countries. In each case, the UK has substantial assets.

### **State power**

Arguably the most important tool of state power, and that on which other instruments are built, is economic. As noted (and as the Integrated Review emphasizes),<sup>71</sup> the UK has one of the world's largest economies, modern infrastructure and several internationally successful sectors. Yet it also faces long-standing weaknesses: marked income and regional inequalities; investment and productivity levels below those of its peers; and large current-account deficits that reflect enduring competitiveness problems. Realizing the Integrated Review's breezy narrative of a dynamic, open, innovative, high-tech, competitive and green UK economy will necessitate overcoming structural challenges that have confounded governments of all parties for decades. Furthermore, most analysts expect that Brexit will leave the UK worse off economically than if it had remained in the EU.<sup>72</sup> By international standards, the UK spends heavily on key hard power assets – its diplomatic, intelligence and defence establishments. The UK's post-Brexit economic performance will determine whether such investment can be sustained.

The UK has skilled diplomats to understand and interpret Russian intentions, capabilities and activities, and to mount lobbying and public diplomacy campaigns (as in the aftermath of the 2018 Salisbury attack, for example). Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO, which in 2020 became the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – FCDO) has been rebuilding expertise on Russia and its neighbours that was lost after the Cold War, and especially after the 9/11 attacks in the US, when resources were shifted elsewhere. With one exception, each year since 2013/14 around 40 FCO/FCDO staff have received full-time language training in Russian.<sup>73</sup> In 2015, the FCO created a group of staff with careers anchored in Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the so-called 'EECADRE', though it is unclear how large this is or how effectively it is being used.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, pp. 51–55.

<sup>72</sup> For example, the Office of Budget Responsibility has estimated that the post-Brexit trading relationship between the UK and the EU will 'reduce [the UK's] long-run productivity by 4 per cent relative to remaining in the EU'. See Office for Budget Responsibility (2021), 'Brexit analysis', 6 May 2021, <https://obr.uk/forecasts-in-depth/the-economy-forecast/brexit-analysis> (accessed 13 Jan. 2022).

<sup>73</sup> See the FCO annual reports for 2013–20, at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/annual-report-and-accounts> (accessed 13 Jan. 2022).

<sup>74</sup> UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2017), *The United Kingdom's relations with Russia: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2016–17*, First Special Report of Session 2017–19, HC 332, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfa/332/332.pdf>.

The UK has much-respected intelligence services, with capabilities enhanced by their unique relationship with US counterparts. Like the FCDO, however, they have had priorities other than Russia for most of the last 30 years, a point underlined in the ISC's Russia report. The committee described the extent to which intelligence resources have focused on terrorism from 2001/02 and concluded that 'until recently, the Government had badly underestimated the Russian threat and the response it required'. The report also implied that, given other requirements, the agencies would have to use existing resources more efficiently, rather than acquiring more.<sup>75</sup>

**In 2020, the UK had the fifth largest defence budget in the world, giving it significant full-spectrum deterrent and fighting forces. Some of its plans respond directly to capabilities that Russia has or is developing.**

The diplomats and agencies (with other departments) are capable of devising sanctions and other measures to respond to unacceptable Russian actions. While it remained a member of the EU, the UK made a disproportionate contribution to the design of EU sanctions regimes, and the targeting of individuals and entities, as the EU has acknowledged.<sup>76</sup>

Lastly in relation to the sphere of state power, in 2020 the UK had the fifth largest defence budget in the world,<sup>77</sup> giving it significant full-spectrum deterrent and fighting forces. Some of the plans laid out in the Ministry of Defence's 2021 Defence Command Paper, such as a surveillance capability to safeguard undersea cables, respond directly to capabilities that Russia has or is developing.<sup>78</sup> Apart from its land, sea and air forces, the UK is strengthening its offensive and defensive cyber assets through the National Cyber Force, established in 2020 as a partnership between the Ministry of Defence and the intelligence agencies – important capabilities to invest in, given the threats posed by the Russian state, and by Russian state-connected hackers and cybercriminals. In addition, the UK is raising the self-imposed cap on the number of nuclear warheads in its stockpile, mainly in response to Russia's investments in new weapons systems and missile defence.<sup>79</sup>

Even so, the UK can only deter and if necessary defend against Russia as part of a coalition, in particular NATO. And while the UK will remain a major maritime and air power by European standards, there are concerns that its army lacks the numbers, armour, firepower and lift to offer a credible defence against heavily

<sup>75</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), *Russia*, pp. 19–22.

<sup>76</sup> Barker, A (2018), 'EU and UK seek speedy Brexit deal on defence and security', *Financial Times*, 4 February 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/cdf96d34-066f-11e8-9650-9c0ad2d7c5b5>.

<sup>77</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2021), 'World military spending rises to almost \$2 trillion in 2020', 26 April 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/world-military-spending-rises-almost-2-trillion-2020>.

<sup>78</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (2021), *Defence in a competitive age*, Command Paper, CP 411, London: HMSO, p. 49, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-in-a-competitive-age>.

<sup>79</sup> As UK defence minister Ben Wallace told the House of Commons in March 2021 when presenting *Defence in a competitive age*. See *Hansard*, HC Deb. Vol. 691, 22 March 2021.

armed, highly capable Russian conventional forces in a crisis in Eastern Europe.<sup>80</sup> The Ministry of Defence plans to reduce the size of the army (from 76,000 to 72,500)<sup>81</sup> and the number of tanks (from 227 to 148, though those 148 will be modernized).<sup>82</sup> But this smaller force will seemingly take on more tasks in more places, working alongside allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, maintaining ‘permanent and persistent global engagement’, increasing the UK’s presence in Kenya and deploying more units in Oman. Similarly, the navy will have more ships east of Suez. The UK wants to be, and be seen to be, a military power with global reach, yet risks overextending itself. If there is an upside to the debacle in Afghanistan, it is the opportunity for the UK and other NATO countries to refocus on the threat posed by Russia to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area.

### Soft power

As the Integrated Review notes, the UK has valuable soft power assets.<sup>83</sup> These include the high quality of its legal system and public institutions, and low levels of corruption. In 2021 the UK came 16th among 139 countries and jurisdictions in the World Justice Project’s *Rule of Law Index*, and 11th among 180 countries and territories in Transparency International’s 2020 *Corruption Perception Index*.<sup>84</sup> The 2019 Portland soft power index ranked the UK second out of 30 major economies, highlighting the attractiveness of its creative, new media, educational and research sectors.<sup>85</sup> Such capabilities assist attempts by the UK (with allies and partners) to press Russia to honour its international obligations as regards democracy and fundamental freedoms. They also support the UK economy, attracting Russian businesses, researchers and students to the UK.

Judging by the spread of authoritarian models of governance in recent years, however, the pull of the UK’s soft power should be kept in perspective. Furthermore, the Kremlin has disrupted some of the UK’s most effective soft power instruments, presumably fearing their potential impact. The BBC’s Russian-language service was available on medium wave and FM in Russia until 2007, when its Russian partners were forced by the Kremlin to remove it. By 2011 it had become an entirely online service. The Kremlin may now try to complicate the work of BBC News Russian (formerly known as the BBC Russian Service) still further by classing it a ‘foreign agent’, as it did the US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.<sup>86</sup> The British Council, which once organized cultural exchanges and English-language library services in 15 Russian cities, had to close all its offices except that in Moscow in 2007; the Russian authorities closed the Moscow office in 2018 following the Skripal affair. Surprisingly, Russia is not among the top 20 sources of foreign students in UK

<sup>80</sup> For example, Watling, J. (2019), *The Future of Fires: Maximising the UK’s Tactical and Operational Firepower*, RUSI Occasional Papers, London: Royal United Services Institute, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/the-future-of-fires-maximising-the-uk%E2%80%99s-tactical-and-operational-firepower>.

<sup>81</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (2021), *Defence in a competitive age*, p. 52.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>83</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>84</sup> World Justice Project (2020), *Rule of Law Index 2020*, [https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-ROLI-2020-Online\\_0.pdf](https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-ROLI-2020-Online_0.pdf); and Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index*, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl>.

<sup>85</sup> Portland Communications (undated), ‘The Soft Power 30’, <https://softpower30.com/country/united-kingdom> (accessed 13 Jan. 2022).

<sup>86</sup> Prince, T. (2021), ‘Russia’s ‘Foreign Agent’ Amendments ‘Seriously Violate’ Human Rights: Venice Commission’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 7 July 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-foreign-agents-europe-/31346269.html>.

higher education, despite the popularity of UK boarding schools among members of Russia's elite.<sup>87</sup> More positively, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic more than 200,000 Russians visited the UK each year, offering opportunities for people-to-people contacts and the chance to leave Russians with a positive impression of the UK.<sup>88</sup>

### **Partnerships with third countries**

Finally, the UK needs alliances and partnerships. Because Moscow sees the UK post-Brexit as a second-tier and declining power, it may be more tempted to act against UK interests (as it did in the 2018 Salisbury attack). With allies, the UK is much better placed to deter hostile Russian action and respond to it if it happens. The government frequently touts the UK's post-Brexit sovereign choices; in reality, working closely with like-minded states will remain the starting point for its Russia policy.

As the Integrated Review notes, the UK is an extensively networked power.<sup>89</sup> In terms of hard and soft power, it has much to contribute to its alliances and partnerships, and those international organizations and groups of which it is a member. In principle, then, it can draw on a portfolio of multilateral and bilateral 'equalizers' when dealing with Russia.

Among multilateral bodies, the EU (still) and NATO stand out: 'the collective synthesis of defence and security capabilities in their widest, most modern sense.'<sup>90</sup> Until Brexit, EU membership was paramount for the UK, conferring the automatic cover and power of the world's largest economic bloc when relations with Russia soured. In 2014, the impact of sanctions on Russia was much greater because they were imposed by 28 member states. Even in 2018, though the UK was halfway out of the door, it was able to persuade its EU partners to show solidarity after the Salisbury attack, resulting in coordinated expulsions of Russian intelligence officers. In addition, the UK made a vital contribution to EU foreign and security policy as Western Europe's pre-eminent provider of military, diplomatic and intelligence assets.

Despite Brexit, the EU is still an essential security partner for the UK, not least in Eastern Europe. Through its association agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the EU seeks to stabilize the region and help defend these countries against Russian pressure and aggression. The UK's decision not to include foreign and security policy cooperation in the post-Brexit EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) means, however, that institutional ties between the UK and other European countries have weakened. The Integrated Review says that the UK 'will work with the EU where our interests coincide'.<sup>91</sup> But the UK now has no seat at the EU table. It will have to work harder to influence the EU27, and will have to rely on sympathetic member states to argue its case inside the EU.

<sup>87</sup> Universities UK (2020), 'International facts and figures 2020', <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/international-facts-figures-2020.aspx> (accessed 13 Jan. 2022).

<sup>88</sup> Data from VisitBritain, 'Inbound tourism trends by market', average of the years 2009–19 from the table 'The top 50 inbound tourism markets for Britain from 2009–2019', [https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/Documents-Library/documents/ips\\_2009\\_to\\_2019\\_top\\_50\\_markets.xlsx](https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/Documents-Library/documents/ips_2009_to_2019_top_50_markets.xlsx).

<sup>89</sup> For example HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Clarke, M. (2019), *The Challenge of Defending Britain*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 97.

<sup>91</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, p. 21.

NATO, which provides the only substantive military deterrent to Russia in the Euro-Atlantic space, is the other vital multilateral body in relation to the UK's Russia policy. The Integrated Review states that 'the UK will remain the leading European Ally in NATO, working with allies to deter nuclear, conventional and hybrid threats to our security, particularly from Russia'.<sup>92</sup> Yet even NATO can only be partly insulated from the reverberations of Brexit: most NATO members, notably France and Germany, are also members of the EU and have been bruised by the UK's acrimonious departure from the Union.<sup>93</sup>

The UK should increase its political investment in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) as well as in NATO. Though the OSCE is severely constrained by the need to achieve consensus on almost every decision, enabling Russia to block actions it finds inconvenient, it remains the European security organization with the most comprehensive membership – 57 countries, including the US and Russia. Its commitments are not legally binding, but Russia has signed up to them. Two of the most important are the Helsinki Final Act (Helsinki Accords) of 1975, and the Document of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE of 1991. In the first, the Soviet Union (and Russia, by succession) accepted the right of participating states 'to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance', thereby acknowledging that one state could not veto another's choice to join organizations like the EU or NATO.<sup>94</sup> In the second, the participating states 'categorically and irrevocably' declared that human rights commitments did not 'belong exclusively to the internal affairs' of individual states, thus giving states the right to hold each other accountable for their implementation of such commitments.<sup>95</sup> UK officials have been active in using the mechanisms of the OSCE to raise concerns about human rights in Russia, but UK ministers tend to pay attention to the OSCE only during its annual Ministerial Council meetings; they should do more to hold Russia to its OSCE commitments.

The Integrated Review is clear that the UK's most important bilateral partners will continue to be the US, followed by France and Germany,<sup>96</sup> sometimes acting in arrangements such as NATO, the trans-Atlantic 'Quad'<sup>97</sup> and the G7.<sup>98</sup> With each of these countries, there is a broad identity of interests as regards Russia, although their policy approaches can differ significantly.<sup>99</sup> Because the Biden administration is less erratic than its predecessor, it should be easier for Washington and London to find common approaches to Russia. US interests in relation to Russia are, however, narrower than those of its European allies: its economic relationship with Russia is limited, and it therefore looks at sanctions almost exclusively in terms of the impact on Russia, whereas Germany, in particular, has to consider how they affect its own economy. Equally, most of Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal targets the US and

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>93</sup> And additionally, in France's case, by the Australia–UK–US (AUKUS) nuclear-powered submarine deal that was announced in September 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (1975), *Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe Final Act*, p. 4, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (1991), 'Document of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference of the Human Dimension of the CSCE', p. 29, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/3/14310.pdf>.

<sup>96</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, pp. 60–61.

<sup>97</sup> The members of which are France, Germany, the UK and the US.

<sup>98</sup> On other issues, especially intelligence-sharing, the UK and US will in addition be able to co-operate with Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the other members of the 'Five Eyes' alliance. This is not, however, a policymaking forum.

<sup>99</sup> Weiss, A. S. (2020), *Russia and Europe: Stuck on Autopilot*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/24/russia-and-europe-stuck-on-autopilot-pub-82773>.



looms larger for American administrations than for their European counterparts. Moreover, the experience of the Trump presidency highlights the risks now inherent in reliance on the US. Like other US allies, the UK has an incentive to hedge against the possibility that Trump is re-elected in 2024 – or that someone else espousing his brand of national populism is. And regardless of the political persuasion of the next US president, the reorientation of US foreign policy away from Europe and towards Asia will almost certainly continue.

Uncertainty about the future direction of US policy argues for a determined effort by the UK to rebuild relations with the EU, and in particular with France and Germany. This would give the European pillar of the trans-Atlantic community renewed strength and make the UK more relevant in the US – thus strengthening the partnerships that the UK needs for an effective Russia strategy. In the past, the UK would have tried to broker a common EU stance (as it did, for example, to ensure that the EU imposed sanctions on Moscow in 2014), while remaining cognizant of the US standpoint. Now it must use other formats, such as the Quad, to find policies that its main European partners will advocate when they meet the rest of the EU; and it must do this without becoming separated from the US position.

## **UK policy towards Russia: operational priorities**

In a largely adversarial relationship with Russia, and considering the competing pressures on UK decision-makers and the finite resources at their disposal, how should the UK use these policy tools to advance its interests? The following section identifies four operational priorities: rebuilding domestic resilience; concentrating on the Euro-Atlantic space; being a trusted and valued ally and partner; and augmenting UK soft power.

### **Rebuilding domestic resilience**

Meeting the Russia challenge in the 2020s requires the UK to put its house in better order. Despite the importance attached to the Fusion Doctrine, however, the 2015 NSS/SDSR and the NSCRs that followed conveyed little idea of the scale of the challenge.

Rebuilding domestic resilience primarily means becoming better able to deter and withstand hostile Russian activities. To counter the threat of assassinations on UK territory, the government should focus on deterrence. Besides continuing to make the UK a more hostile environment for Russian operatives ('deterrence by denial'), it should consider using the 2018 Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act (SAML) against senior Russians (officials and other members of the elite) who enable the current leadership, not just those directly implicated in an attack ('deterrence by punishment').<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> Allan, D. (2018), *Managed Confrontation: UK Policy Towards Russia After the Salisbury Attack*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/10/managed-confrontation-uk-policy-towards-russia-after-salisbury-attack>.

The UK should also continue to strengthen its cyber defences. According to the Integrated Review, the UK aims to be a ‘responsible cyber power’<sup>101</sup> and to establish norms in cyberspace.<sup>102</sup> The Review speaks of using ‘the UK’s full spectrum of levers [...] to detect, disrupt and deter our adversaries’.<sup>103</sup> So far, however, the UK (unlike the US) has not imposed or threatened sanctions against Russia for hostile cyber activity.<sup>104</sup> That may lead Russia to believe that the rewards of disruptive, as opposed to purely intelligence-gathering, cyber-enabled attacks on the UK outweigh the risks of retaliation.

**So far the UK (unlike the US) has not imposed or threatened sanctions against Russia for hostile cyber activity. That may lead Russia to believe that the rewards of disruptive, as opposed to purely intelligence-gathering, cyber-enabled attacks on the UK outweigh the risks of retaliation.**

More often, however, hostile Russian actions will be subtler in nature. The threats posed by Russian espionage and covert influence-peddling justify a carefully drafted Foreign Agents Registration Act, as recommended in the ISC Russia report,<sup>105</sup> and reform of the UK’s 2014 Lobbying Act.<sup>106</sup> The UK also needs to ensure the integrity of election and referendum campaigns: the ISC and DCMSC reports refer to evidence of Russian attempts to influence the outcomes of the 2014 Scottish independence and 2016 Brexit referendums.<sup>107</sup>

Regardless of potential short-term embarrassment, the UK government must rectify failings in the current system of political party funding.<sup>108</sup> The Conservative Party, in particular, has been wilfully blind to the risks posed when large donations from British citizens of Russian origin or others with possible high-level links in Russia are exchanged for access to the prime minister of the day or other senior ministers.<sup>109</sup> Donors are not driven by altruism; they calculate that access brings

<sup>101</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21. The UK’s new National Cyber Strategy contains a similar statement. See HM Government (2021), *National Cyber Strategy 2022: Pioneering a cyber future with the whole of the UK*, p. 100, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-cyber-strategy-2022>.

<sup>104</sup> MacColl, J. (2021), ‘The UK’s Approach to Russian Cyber Operations Shows No Signs of Changing’, Commentary, Royal United Services Institute, 21 May 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uks-approach-russian-cyber-operations-shows-no-signs-changing>.

<sup>105</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), *Russia*, pp. 33–34. The Integrated Review (pp. 74–75) promises ‘Counter-State Threats’ legislation, including a foreign agent registration scheme, ‘when parliamentary time allows’, which suggests a lack of urgency.

<sup>106</sup> McKay, A. M. and Wozniak, A. (2020), ‘Opaque: an empirical evaluation of lobbying transparency in the UK’, *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 9: pp. 102–18.

<sup>107</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), *Russia*, pp. 12–15; and UK House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee (2019), *Disinformation and ‘fake news’*, pp. 69–71.

<sup>108</sup> Heathershaw, J., Cooley, A., Mayne, T., Michel, C., Prelec, T., Sharman, J. and Soares de Oliveira, R. (2021), *The UK’s kleptocracy problem: How servicing post-Soviet elites weakens the rule of law*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, pp. 40–43, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/uks-kleptocracy-problem>.

<sup>109</sup> See, for example, Sabbagh, D., Harding, L., and Davies, H. (2020), ‘Lubov Chernukhin: Tories’ tennis-bidding, record-setting donor’, *Guardian*, 27 February 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/27/lubov-chernukhin-tories-tennis-record-donor-uk-russia>.

influence. It is not enough to say that donations comply with current laws and regulations: the law should be tightened to mandate closer scrutiny of donors and a prohibition on meetings with them in the absence of advisers or civil servants, so that discussions touching on public policy are properly recorded.

Similarly, the UK government must urgently address the threat posed by illicit finance, including from Russia, using its position at the heart of the international financial system to provide stronger leadership, improving the resourcing of its own supervisory agencies and working more effectively with the private sector to manage risk.<sup>110</sup> Such efforts must be mirrored in the Crown dependencies and British overseas territories: the Panama Papers investigation and other scandals – most recently, the Pandora Papers revelations of 2021 – have shown UK offshore jurisdictions to be conduits for the alleged laundering of dubious financial flows from Russia (and elsewhere).<sup>111</sup> Besides gradually strengthening the integrity of the UK's institutions, this would weaken charges of double standards. At present the UK is understandably seen as hypocritical, a perception that damages its reputation and weakens its influence: not meeting the ethical and legal standards that it urges on others, in this case the rule of law, accountability and transparency. Values and interests do not always converge, but it is imperative that UK governments eliminate the worst inconsistencies, thus closing the gap between their words and actions.

The Tier 1 (Investor) Visa regime, which has been described as 'a significant corruption and money-laundering risk' requiring urgent reform,<sup>112</sup> is a related issue. Though numbers have fallen sharply since 2014, Russians received an estimated 20 per cent of the 12,649 investor visas issued by the UK between 2008 and 2020 to high net-worth applicants and their dependants in return for investment in UK government bonds or businesses.<sup>113</sup> If a reformed scheme is to be retained, the authorities must rigorously scrutinize the sources of applicants' wealth, and financial institutions must ensure that anti-money laundering checks on them are more than a mechanical exercise. Both should take an expansive view of what constitutes a 'politically exposed person', bearing in mind the intertwining of political and economic power that is central to Russia's system.

Countering Russian disinformation involves addressing not just the 'supply' side of the problem – through rebuttal and counteraction – but, more importantly, the 'demand' side: why are certain UK audiences receptive to disinformation, not just from Russia?<sup>114</sup> Although there are no easy or quick solutions, the UK should study

---

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, Keatinge, T. (2020), 'The UK and Illicit Finance: Still Part of the Problem, Not Part of the Solution', RUSI Newsbrief, 23 October 2020, Royal United Services Institute, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-newsbrief/uk-and-illicit-finance-still-part-problem-not-part-solution>. Some of these actions will require security coordination with the EU to make them fully effective (e.g. sanctions, police and intelligence cooperation). The TCA leaves gaps in such important security-related areas as UK access to the Schengen information system and personal data.

<sup>111</sup> On the Panama Papers, see Bernstein, J. (2017), *Secrecy World: Inside the Panama Papers Investigation of Illicit Money Networks and the Global Elite*, New York: Henry Holt & Company, especially pp. 88–102. On the Pandora Papers, see International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (undated), 'Pandora Papers', <https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers> (accessed 13 Jan. 2022).

<sup>112</sup> Hawley, S., Havenhand, G. and Robinson, T. (2021), *Red Carpet for Dirty Money: How the UK's Golden Visa regime urgently needs further reform and more transparency*, Spotlight on Corruption, p. 2, <https://www.spotlightcorruption.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Golden-Visa-Briefing.-Final1.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> For a general discussion, see Woolley, S. and Joseff, K. (2020), *Demand for Deceit: How the Way We Think Drives Disinformation*, Working Paper, National Endowment for Democracy, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Demand-for-Deceit.pdf>.

the experience of countries like Finland and Sweden, which emphasize societal resilience in their national security policies and include media literacy in school curriculums. The UK should also work with US and other regulators to press social media companies to invest more resources in identifying and removing disinformation from their platforms.

Lastly, rebuilding resilience means addressing the UK's internal divisions. More than any aspect of Brexit, this is what diminishes the UK in Russian eyes, potentially increasing the risk of hostile action because Russian decision-makers do not take the UK as seriously as it thinks it is or should be taken. Tackling division requires dealing with contested and complex problems such as inequality, social mobility, electoral alienation and apathy, disempowerment among minority communities, identity cleavages and low levels of trust in public institutions. Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, which acknowledges the difficulties involved. But domestic division has implications for national security, and should be addressed at least partly in this light.

### **Concentrating on the Euro-Atlantic space**

The Integrated Review rightly identifies the Euro-Atlantic space as the area 'where the bulk of the UK's security focus will remain'.<sup>115</sup> For the UK, the bedrock of regional security will remain NATO. As noted, the Integrated Review is emphatic in its commitment to the alliance, stating that the UK 'will continue to exceed the NATO guideline of spending 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defence, and to declare our nuclear and offensive cyber capabilities to Allies' defence under our Article 5 commitment'.<sup>116</sup> For these commitments to be fully credible, the UK must address shortcomings in its conventional ground force capabilities, as noted earlier. The authors' conversations with analysts in Central and Northeast Europe show uncertainty about the UK's ability to reinforce its 900 troops in Estonia and 150 in Poland in the event of a crisis involving Russia.<sup>117</sup> The UK needs to invest more seriously in the capabilities needed to deploy suitably armed troops quickly to reinforce the region.

Even within the Euro-Atlantic area, the UK must not spread its limited resources too thinly. It should focus on the Baltic, the High North (broadly speaking, the Barents Sea and adjacent sea areas, as well as land in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia) and the Western Approaches (the Atlantic Ocean to the west of the UK and Ireland) because of their geographical proximity to the UK, and the high level of Russian activity in those areas. It is also vital that the UK works closely with the EU and other partners to improve Ukraine's security, given the latter's geopolitical importance and the heightened Russian military threat to it since 2021. The 2020 UK-Ukraine Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership Agreement provides a platform for continued UK support in such areas as governance reform and defence cooperation.<sup>118</sup> The UK government should view the partnership as a complement

<sup>115</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age*, p. 14.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>117</sup> Figures from British Army website (undated), 'Deployments – Baltics', <https://www.army.mod.uk/deployments/baltics> (accessed 13 Jan.2022).

<sup>118</sup> HM Government (2020), 'UK-Ukraine political, free trade and strategic agreement', 9 November 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-ukraine-political-free-trade-and-strategic-partnership-agreement>.

to the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, which (with other fundamental reforms) remains the long-term anchor for stability in Ukraine.<sup>119</sup> Both the EU and the UK are major donors to projects and programmes for Ukraine; excluding macro-financial assistance, the EU and associated institutions have mobilized more than €13 billion in loans and €2 billion in grants since 2014, while the UK spent more than £40 million on projects in Ukraine in 2019–20 alone.<sup>120</sup> In the defence field, the UK is a significant contributor of assistance and advice to Ukraine. In 2021 it agreed to step up assistance to the Ukrainian navy, including through the joint production of ships.<sup>121</sup> In June, the Royal Navy’s HMS Defender sailed close to Crimea to underline the UK government’s view that the peninsula remains Ukrainian territory.<sup>122</sup> The UK should continue to deploy ships regularly to the Black Sea to assert the principle of freedom of navigation, and to conduct training exercises with Ukraine and other partners. In January 2022, in response to Russian military deployments possibly presaging a further invasion of Ukrainian territory, the UK delivered 2,000 anti-tank weapons to Ukraine and announced that it would send 30 troops to train the Ukrainian forces in their use.<sup>123</sup>

## **In the defence field, the UK is a significant contributor of assistance and advice to Ukraine.**

At the same time, the UK should not seek a leading role everywhere. In the Western Balkans, for example, given the aspirations of most countries to join the EU, it makes sense for the European Commission and EU member states to be at the forefront of efforts to combat Russian actions that damage Western interests.

As before Brexit, some of the UK’s cooperation with EU member states will be through bilateral or ‘minilateral’ channels. Two important formats will be the E3 and the Nordic/Baltic countries. The E3 comprises the UK, France and Germany. It played a leading role in the negotiation of the JCPOA and brings the UK together with the Western members of the Normandy grouping, responsible for managing the conflict in Ukraine. The UK would like to broaden the E3’s agenda, but fractious relations with France (over Brexit, but most of all over the AUKUS pact) make this less likely. If the UK wants to use the E3 to influence the direction of EU policy from the outside, it will have to lower the temperature in its relations with France.

---

<sup>119</sup> The authors of course appreciate the irony of a post-Brexit UK supporting Ukraine’s deeper integration with the EU.

<sup>120</sup> European Commission (2021), ‘European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations: Ukraine’, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/ukraine\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/ukraine_en) (accessed 13 Jan. 2022); and HM Government (2019), ‘UK programme assistance to Ukraine in 2019-2020’, 13 September 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-programme-assistance-to-2019-2020>.

<sup>121</sup> UK Ministry of Defence and Quin, J. (2021), ‘UK signs agreement to support enhancement of Ukrainian naval capabilities’, Press release, 23 June 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-signs-agreement-to-support-enhancement-of-ukrainian-naval-capabilities>.

<sup>122</sup> BBC News (2021), ‘HMS Defender: Russian jets and ships shadow British warship’, 23 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57583363>.

<sup>123</sup> Haynes, D. (2022), ‘Russia-Ukraine tensions: UK sends 30 elite troops and 2,000 anti-tank weapons to Ukraine amid fears of Russian invasion’, Sky News, 20 January 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-invasion-fears-as-britain-sends-2-000-anti-tank-weapons-to-ukraine-12520950>.

Under David Cameron and Theresa May, the UK took part in more or less annual summits with the Nordic/Baltic countries, with whom there was considerable common ground, including on Russia, although the last such meeting was in 2018. The UK should take the initiative to revive this format, perhaps tying it to the multinational Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF).<sup>124</sup> This UK-led force, which is theoretically capable of deploying more than 10,000 troops, focuses on the High North, the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic. It demonstrates the UK's commitment to regional security, and brings together a group of NATO and non-NATO countries with shared security interests. The UK should deepen political and military cooperation with these partners, learning from their experience of developing societal resilience when dealing with Russia. The JEF is not, however, a standing force; nor does it create new capabilities.

### **Being a trusted and valued ally and partner**

Contrary to the warm words in the Integrated Review about cooperation with the EU, the UK's handling of Brexit since 2016 has shaken its international reputation for good governance, reliability and trustworthiness<sup>125</sup> – much more so than some UK decision-makers acknowledge or appear to realize. The UK has tried to isolate tensions over its relationship with the EU from its bilateral security and defence relations, and its cooperation in NATO. The more toxic relations become with the EU, however, the harder it becomes to sustain good relations in other formats. Strong alliances require mutual confidence, and by threatening to rip up commitments – most recently, as regards the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland – the UK is calling into question its trustworthiness. Improved relations with the EU, especially over Ireland, would strengthen the UK's other core partnerships, notably with the US. The UK will otherwise find it harder to mobilize the coalitions essential for an effective Russia policy.

### **Augmenting UK soft power**

The UK government will need to work out how to counter the Kremlin's efforts to limit the reach of UK soft power in Russia. One way would be to increase people-to-people contacts. The Russian authorities have long sought to persuade the UK and the EU to ease barriers to entry for holders of Russian diplomatic and 'service' passports (issued to state officials, members of the Federal Assembly and the like); the UK should reject this. Instead, it should look at facilitating entry to the UK for Russians not associated with the state apparatus, especially young Russians. For example, it could lower visa fees for students and other Russians under the age of 25.

The UK should encourage Russians to study at British universities through scholarships and bursaries, seeking commercial sponsorship where necessary. It could increase the number of its flagship Chevening Scholarships, offered

---

<sup>124</sup> Together with the UK, the countries involved in the JEF are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. JEF defence ministers meet more or less annually, most recently in July 2021.

<sup>125</sup> For example, Evans, E. and Mayes, J. (2020), 'Why Boris Johnson's Britain is Turning 'Rogue State' Over Brexit', Bloomberg, 10 September 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-09/why-johnson-s-britain-is-turning-rogue-state-over-brexit-q-a>.

to outstanding Russian students, and the shorter-term Chevening Fellowships, aimed at mid-career professionals, or set up a Russia-specific scheme similar to the Marshall Scholarships, around 40 of which are offered to US students each year.

BBC News Russian should be a high priority for investment in staff and technology, to enable it to gather news within Russia (including via citizen journalists) and reach its audience there despite official obstructionism. It already has a presence on the encrypted Telegram private messaging service, widely used in Russia. In the cultural sphere the UK government should fund the British Council to give Russians online access to British culture and English language resources, drawing on the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which much content, from school classes to virtual gallery tours, has been delivered via the internet.

### **Post-Brexit flexibility**

The downsides of Brexit for the UK's Russia policy are clear, but there are benefits. In principle, the UK can act more nimbly, because it no longer needs to wait for an EU consensus to form. For example, since the adoption of the 2018 SAMLA, the UK can impose sanctions independently and is not subject to the constraints of working with countries, such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary, whose relationships with Russia are much warmer than the UK's.<sup>126</sup> The UK has already used the SAMLA against Russia, most recently following the poisoning of anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny.<sup>127</sup> Further use of it should be expected if Russia's political system becomes even more authoritarian, as seems probable, or if Russia significantly escalates its use of military force against Ukraine. The City of London's role as a global financial services hub gives the UK more leverage than many of Russia's other commercial partners – if the government is prepared to tolerate the hit to specific (and politically well-connected) sectors of the UK economy that would result from more stringent sanctions. Even so, the UK will still need to coordinate with partners, primarily the US and EU; the latter, Russia's largest trading partner by some distance, has much greater economic clout than the UK.

## **Conclusions: four propositions for UK decision-makers**

As they craft a post-Brexit Russia policy, UK decision-makers should be guided by four propositions. The first is that policy must be based upon clear, hard-headed thinking about Russia, the outlook for bilateral relations and the UK's Russia-related interests – not upon comforting but unrealistic and imprecise

---

<sup>126</sup> HM Government (2018), 'Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018', Chapter 13, The Stationery Office Limited, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/13/contents/enacted>.

<sup>127</sup> HM Government (2020), 'UK sanctions Alexey Navalny's poisoners', Press release, 15 October 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-alexey-navalnys-poisoners>; and HM Government (2021), 'UK sanctions FSB operatives over poisoning of Alexey Navalny', Press release, 20 August 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/russia-uk-sanctions-fsb-operatives-over-poisoning-of-alexey-navalny>.

assumptions. A good place to start is the final paragraph of the ISC's Russia report. This queried the weight that the cross-Whitehall Russia Strategy appeared still to attach to eventual cooperation with Russia:

Whilst it is possible that an improved relationship between Russia and the UK may one day reduce the threat to the UK, it is unrealistic to think that that might happen under the current Russian leadership.<sup>128</sup>

The authors agree. Russia might indeed become more cooperative, as UK policymakers define the term. Yet the likelihood of that happening in the foreseeable future is remote.<sup>129</sup> And even if it did happen, the history of bilateral relations suggests that a more cooperative phase would probably be transitory.

The second proposition is that an essentially adversarial relationship with Russia is not in itself contrary to UK interests. Rather, it tells us that core UK and Russian interests are at odds; that the reasons why this is the case need to be understood; and that the difficulties that arise should be recognized calmly and addressed soberly. Mirroring the approach to relations with the Soviet bloc adopted by NATO in the 1960s, much of the UK's Russia policy will continue to be about managing differences: firstly through deterrence, and secondly through dialogue designed to minimize the risks of misperception, misunderstanding and miscalculation. Engagement on these latter issues should be conducted bilaterally with Russia, and in coordination with allies and partners. But expecting dialogue to resolve deep-seated differences of interest in the foreseeable future, particularly as regards the defence of the UK and Euro-Atlantic security, would be a profound mistake.

Proposition three is that Brexit makes it more difficult for the UK and the EU to deal with Russia. While its full effects will not be known for years, Russian observers already judge that Brexit is weakening the UK politically and economically, thus confirming it as a lesser power than Russia. Simultaneously, the coalition of EU member states favouring a robust line towards Russia has lost its biggest advocate. The Russia policies of both the UK and its former EU partners will therefore be less coherent and less effective. Has there been a frank discussion in Whitehall of how Russia perceives this state of affairs, and the far-reaching policy implications? And has the cross-Whitehall Russia Strategy been re-examined to account for the very different geopolitical situation in which a post-Brexit UK finds itself? If the answers to these questions are 'no', the UK government cannot credibly claim that it is looking the Russia challenge in the eye.

The final proposition of this paper is that an effective post-Brexit Russia policy demands a realistic assessment of UK power and influence, and an end to delusions of UK (or, more accurately, English) exceptionalism. Ideas of national greatness have clouded assessments of the UK's place in the world, its interests and its relationship with Russia. It is time to discard the conceit of 'Global Britain', which has been widely criticized<sup>130</sup> and appears to be viewed by Russian commentators with borderline incredulity. The UK is not a 'pocket superpower'.<sup>131</sup> It is a wealthy

<sup>128</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2020), *Russia*, p. 41.

<sup>129</sup> On this point, see Kofman and Kendall-Taylor (2021), 'The Myth of Russian Decline', pp. 148–52.

<sup>130</sup> See for example UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2018), *Global Britain*, Sixth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 780, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmffaff/780/780.pdf>.

<sup>131</sup> Stephens, P. (2021), *Britain Alone: The Path from Suez to Brexit*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 417.



and important, yet middling, power which is in decline relative to its past and the countries overtaking it in a disorderly world.<sup>132</sup> UK interests are concentrated in the Euro-Atlantic space, where in large measure they clash with Russia's.

Brexit has not altered the basic elements of the Russia policy challenge that have confronted UK governments for decades. It has, however, further reinforced the need for the UK to identify and prioritize its interests rigorously, address its internal vulnerabilities, repair its external reputation and, on these foundations, maximize its utility to allies and partners, starting with its European neighbours – albeit on less advantageous terms than it enjoyed as a member of the EU. Some will not welcome that message. Like the unpromising outlook for relations with Russia, however, that is the reality now facing the UK.

---

<sup>132</sup> On this point, see Ricketts, P. (2021), *Hard Choices: What Britain Does Next*, London: Atlantic Books, p. 233.

## About the authors

**Duncan Allan** is an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, and is the director of Octant Research & Analysis Ltd, an independent consultancy. For more than 28 years, Duncan was a member of the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office's research analysts cadre, working on the countries of the former Soviet Union, particularly Russia and Ukraine. He served at the British Embassies in Moscow and Kyiv.

**Ian Bond** is the director of foreign policy at the Centre for European Reform (CER). Prior to joining the CER in 2013, Ian spent 28 years as a member of the UK diplomatic service, mostly focusing on Russia and the former Soviet Union. His postings included the UK delegations to NATO and to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the British embassies in Moscow, Riga (where he was ambassador to Latvia) and Washington.

## Acknowledgments

James Nixey, Lubica Polláková and Adam Kowalski of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House were characteristically supportive, encouraging and patient throughout this project. Vera Chapman Browne provided invaluable editorial advice. Several people offered thoughtful and challenging comments on an earlier draft: Rodric Braithwaite, Kadri Liik, Lubica Polláková, Peter Ricketts, Eugene Rumer and four anonymous peer reviewers. David Kramer kindly hosted an informal online discussion group at which the authors tested their initial ideas. In addition, Ian Bond is grateful to Charles Grant, director of the Centre for European Reform, for his support and his encouragement of this project. Any mistakes are, of course, the authors' responsibility.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder. Please direct all enquiries to the publishers.

Chatham House does not express opinions of its own. The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s).

Copyright © The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2022

Cover image: Russians and Russian speakers celebrate Victory Day marching through central London from Whitehall to the Houses of Parliament on 9 May 2018.

Photo credit: Copyright © Richard Baker/In Pictures/Getty Images

ISBN 978 1 78413 284 2

This publication is printed on FSC-certified paper.  
[designbysoapbox.com](http://designbysoapbox.com)



Independent thinking since 1920



The Royal Institute of International Affairs  
Chatham House

10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T +44 (0)20 7957 5700

[contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org) | [chathamhouse.org](http://chathamhouse.org)

Charity Registration Number: 208223