



BRIEFING PAPER

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Defence Command Paper 2021: Summary

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The Government published a Defence Command Paper, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), on 22 March 2021.

The following briefing highlights the **key points** of the Command Paper. References are given to the Defence Secretary's [statement to the Commons](#) where he provides additional detail. Further House of Commons Library analysis of this and the Integrated Review will follow.

Box 1: The Integrated Review and the Defence Command Paper

The Command Paper follows the publication of the Government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) on 16 March 2021. The Integrated Review laid out the UK's vision for the UK in 2030, provides a strategic threat assessment and identifies the UK's foreign policy priorities. It set out the vision of an armed forces with a "full spectrum of capabilities", a global reach and integrated military capabilities across all five operational domains.¹ The review commits to creating an armed forces "that are both prepared for warfighting and more persistent engaging worldwide." What the Integrated Review did not do was describe in detail the Government's plans to modernise the armed forces; there was no mention of personnel numbers or specific capabilities (apart from a select few). A summary of its key points can be found in Library paper [Integrated Review 2021: Summary](#).

1. Secretary of State's foreword

The Defence Secretary describes the Command Paper as "an honest assessment of what we can do and what we will do." Defence will be "threat-focused, modernised and financial sustainable."

He criticises previous reviews for being "over-ambitious and under-funded", leaving forces "overstretched and under-equipped." But he says the £188 billion to be spent on defence over the next four years and the refreshed strategy provides an opportunity "to turn hollow forces into credible ones." Wallace makes clear outdated capabilities will not be retained or protected for sentimental reasons, but nor will battle-proven capabilities be cut "on the promise of novelty."

¹ The traditional three domains of land, air and sea plus the new domains of space and cyberspace.

He indicates a more pro-active use of the armed forces “no longer held as a force of last resort” but persistently engaged globally. Many of the themes in the foreword reflect those laid out in the Integrated Review.

2. Changing strategic context

The Command Paper draws on the Government’s assessment of major trends laid out in the Integrated Review. It repeats the four overarching trends which will be of particular importance to the UK and the changing international order: geo-political and geo-economic shifts; systemic competition; rapid technological change; transnational challenges requiring collective action. It similarly repeats analysis of the blurring of the distinctions between war and peace, home and away, state and non-state, virtual and real.

The paper describes **Russia** as posing the “greatest nuclear, conventional military and sub-threshold threat to European security.” Russia is both a “capable and unpredictable actor” because of the modernisation of its armed forces, its ability to integrate whole of state activity and its “greater appetite for risk.”

China’s rising power is considered the “most significant geopolitical factor in the world today.” An increasing challenge will come from China’s military modernisation (which is proceeding faster than any other nation) and growing international assertiveness within the Indo-Pacific region.

Iran and **North Korea** are the only two other states identified by name in this section, which says they will “continue to pose regional challenges and their nuclear programmes threaten global stability.”

The proliferation of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons and advanced conventional weapons will “increase the risk of conflict” and “increase their ferocity.” Terrorism remains a dynamic and evolving threat to the UK.

Climate change and biodiversity loss is described as a threat multiplier, driving instability, migration, desertification, competition for natural resources and conflict.

Cyberspace and space pose “significant challenges” with limited international agreement on conventions and regulations on the use of advanced technologies. This will also challenge the UK’s historic technological advantage. Here, the paper gives as examples hypersonic missiles to defeat missile defences, or the imaginative employment of relatively low-cost capabilities challenging highly capable air defence or heavily armoured forces, as evidenced in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

3. The future battlefield

This section of the paper delves into the future operating environment. This describes not the physical environment as much as describes a scenario in which states and non-states challenge the UK below the threshold of armed conflict.

The paper returns to the theme of the UK's historical technological advantage being eroded by targeted investment in capabilities "designed to counter our strengths and target our weaknesses." The review suggests state will seek to acquire, overtly and covertly, technologies *and* knowledge from the west to advance their military programmes. The increased availability of off-the-shelf equipment will allow states to upgrade legacy systems. Several states are developing land systems "that can exceed the capability of many NATO nations in range and lethality."

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Hypersonic glide vehicles, capable of carrying a conventional or nuclear warhead, are identified as posing significant challenges for defensive missile systems to encounter.

China' and Russia's naval and air capabilities are discussed in the context of enabling them to project power further afield, conduct operations from increased range and contest or dominate airspace in areas where the UK will need to operate.

China's navy is "out pacing all competitors" with four aircraft carriers by 2030 and a growing fleet of destroyers, while it is also developing a "full spectrum of air capabilities."

Russia's significant underwater capabilities are mentioned, specifically its deep-sea capabilities (threatening undersea cables) and a [torpedo that can deliver a nuclear payload](#) to coastal targets. It can also conduct precision strikes at range and deny freedom of action to the UK and allies through a highly capable integrated air defence system. This capability means Russia can present "a significant threat" to the UK's ability to support its forces in Europe, the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

The review then moves onto proliferation of technology to states and non-state actors whose malign behaviour is already threatening their neighbours. It gives as an example of the use of Iranian supplied ballistic missiles by the Houthis (in Yemen) and the use of chemical agents by North Korea and Russia in recent years.

"Space will be an increasingly contested domain."

Space assets are at risk from potential adversaries who are aware of how reliant space is on cyberspace; opportunities to attack the UK via cyberspace "will almost certainly increase", from state, state-sponsored and criminal groups. Several states are already investing in anti-satellite weapons.

4. The UK's strategic approach

Our approach to warfare has evolved relatively slowly in recent years, while our adversaries have invested in equipment and forces that expose our vulnerabilities.

This section sets out the UK's new [Integrated Operating Concept](#), published in September 2020.

It is based on the assessment that the UK's adversaries are adapting their approach to enable them to win without warfighting and have invested in equipment and forces that "expose our vulnerabilities." Failing to adapt and respond will hand the advantage to our adversaries: "We cannot afford to stand still while the world changes around us."

The paper discusses the need to be more assertive in demonstrating the will and capability to confront threats openly; to engage internationally to increase understanding and pre-empt threats; to integrate across all five domains, and across government, and to be information led. Higher-risk research will support the modernisation of the armed forces.

The carrier strike group is highlighted as underlining the UK's global ambition, strategic flexibility, ability to project global influence and a message about the UK's ability, and willingness, to act globally.

5. Evolving for the future

Here the paper explains the model of persistent engagement – discussed in the Integrated Review but expanded upon in the Command Paper.

The **Defence Attaché network** and British defence staffs will be expanded by about a third, providing a professionalised cadre of permanently deployed personnel delivering defence diplomacy.

“We will rebalance our force to provide a more proactive, forward deployed, persistent presence.”

A global foundation of sovereign or partnered bases and facilities. Existing facilities in **Cyprus, Gibraltar** and an “enhanced presence” in **Kenya** are all referenced. There will be further investment in **Oman** and a commitment to the Gulf's stability and prosperity. Investment in existing storage facilities in **Germany** will increase the readiness of land forces for deployment in Europe.

The UK will continue to contribute to **NATO's** forward posture, including through the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup in Estonia and Poland, air policing missions and contributions to NATO naval groups.

Offshore Patrol Vessels, and later the Type 31 frigates, will be deployed to the South Atlantic, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Guinea and the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The paper suggests that, as well as training and assisting partners' capacity, the UK's armed forces may accompany and operate with them in hostile environments. Here the paper refers to a wide geographic area: Western Balkans and Ukraine; the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan and the Indo-Pacific region.

ISTAR capabilities will be developed so the UK can respond quickly and allow Special Forces to intervene decisively.

The paper reaffirms the UK's commitment to NATO, to Article V, and maintaining the nuclear deterrent. The UK's warfighting forces will be designed to be integrated with allies, acting as a framework nation. The Army will deliver a modernised, adaptable and expeditionary fighting force, centred around HQ Allied Rapid Reaction Corps as a NATO corps HQ, and 3 (UK) Division as a warfighting division, “optimised to fight a peer adversary in a NATO context.” Land forces will be rapidly deployable to reinforce the UK's forward presence while the Carrier Strike group will offer a flexible basing option. The High North and maintaining security in the defence of the North Atlantic remains of great importance. Here the paper mentions the Joint Expeditionary Force and the Type 26 anti-submarine warfare frigates.

The paper reaffirms the UK's commitment to a minimum, credible, independent nuclear deterrent based on a continuous at sea posture and assigned to the defence of NATO.

Existing tasks, such as humanitarian and disaster relief, will continue.

6. Defence's contribution to Global Britain

Here the Command Paper sets out how defence will work with allies to achieve the vision set out in the Integrated Review. These include not just NATO and the US but other alliances and partnerships.

This section begins with a discussion of how the UK's ability to project power is a defining feature of its defence policy:

Demonstrating our capability, and operating it effectively alongside partners, is the best way to ensure stability and avoid conflict occurring.

The paper discusses in greater depth relations with selected countries and organisations, repeating in part some of the statements made in the Integrated Review. Of note is the reference to the UK's partnerships with Canada, Australia and New Zealand being "at the heart of our tilt to the Indo-Pacific." The paper says the UK will work to support them to tackle the security challenges in the region. Both Canada and Australia are procuring the Type 26 frigate. India is also identified as a key pillar in the tilt to the Indo-Pacific.

Also of note is a reference to the Gulf of Guinea and addressing security threats (piracy) to seaborne trade. The UK will develop maritime security partnerships with coastal states like Ghana, and an Offshore Patrol Vessel will visit later in 2021.

7. Our workforce: our finest asset

The MOD discusses how it will attract and retain a diverse, inclusive, motivated and professional workforce. It announces several reviews and strategies:

- A review of professional accreditation of career courses (within 12 months)
- A comprehensive review of pay and reward (within two years)
- A Digital People Strategy will focus on "putting career management" in the palm of people's hands through digital applications
- A Defence Accommodation Strategy in 2021
- A revised Families Strategy
- Deliver the [Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#)

The review also makes the following financial commitments:

- £1.5 billion will be spent on improving new single living accommodation.
- £1.4 billion over the next decade to provide wraparound childcare.

The five MOD-sponsored cadet forces will be sustained and the Cadet Expansion Programme expanded. Later in 2021 the MOD will publish a study of how cadets benefit from their experiences.

A £25 million digital transformation programme will enable Veterans UK to move from paper-based records to digital by 2023.

8. Modernised forces for a competitive age

The paper says the changes being made will ensure the armed forces are more agile, more lethal and more integrated. There will be more money spent on R&D spending, greater focus on experimentation and a faster acquisition programme. Money will be invested to improve readiness, resilience and sustainability of the armed forces.

A graphic of the **Integrated Force 2030** identifies specific capabilities and units but does not provide numbers.

As outlined in the Spending Review 2020 and the Integrated Review, £6.6 billion will be spent on R&D over the next four years. This includes investment in directed energy weapons and swarming drones. It also refers to the [Science and Technology Strategy 2020](#).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and AI-enabled autonomous capabilities are highlighted as being essential. A new Defence Centre for AI will be created. The UK will also work with liberal-democratic partners to shape international legal, ethical and regulatory norms and standards in AI.

The paper states the MOD contributes the majority of the funding for the National Cyber Force, which provides capabilities that will be used to “deceive, degrade, deny, disrupt or destroy” targets in and through cyberspace.

As with cyberspace, the UK intends to help shape the rules and norms governing space. It sets a goal of having the ability to monitor, protect and defend our interests in and around space by 2030. In addition to Skynet 6, an additional £1.4 billion will be spent on establishing a new Space command and a National Space Operations Centre, develop a UK-built Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance satellite constellation and create a Space Academy.

Royal Navy

- More ships, submarines, sailors and marines will be deployed on an enduring basis.
- Offshore patrol vessels will be permanently stationed in the Falklands, the Caribbean, Gibraltar and East of Suez in the Indo-Pacific region.
- A Bay class support ship will be converted to deliver a more agile and lethal littoral strike capability. This will be forward deployed and able to carry special forces.
- Recommits to seven Astute class submarines, eight Type 26 and five Type 31 frigates, and three Fleet Solid Support ships
- Two Littoral Response Groups will be deployed: the first in 2021 to the Euro-Atlantic and the second in 2023 to the Indo-Pacific.
- A new Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance capability. This will safeguard critical undersea national infrastructure (such as cables).
- Multi-Role Support Ships will be available in the early 2030s to deliver Littoral Strike²
- A Type 83 destroyer to replace the type 45 destroyers in the late 2030s

“Capability in the future will be less defined by numbers of people and platforms than by information-centric technologies, automation and a culture of innovation and experimentation.”

² Littoral means the part of the sea which is closest to the shore. Littoral Strike means delivering an assault force from sea close to or directly to the shore.

- The paper announces the retirement of the two oldest Type 23 frigates. The Mine Counter Measure Vessels will also be retired as the new automated Mine Hunting Capability (developed with France) is brought into service.

The Government will be investing in a “renaissance in British shipbuilding” through a shipbuilding pipeline which will “provide opportunities across the Union.”

Army

The army will be reduced to 72,500 by 2025. This is for the full-time trade trained strength and down from the current 76,000.³

The army will be restructured. Full details of the new structure will be announced before the summer.

The Infantry will be reorganised into four divisions comprising a balanced number of battalions offering the full range of infantry roles. The paper says no cap badges will be deleted nor any redundancies required. One single infantry battalion will be deleted. The Defence Secretary’s [statement to the House](#) gave this additional detail: 2nd Battalion the Mercian Regiment will be amalgamated with the 1st Battalion to form a new Boxer-mounted battalion.

A new Ranger Regiment will operate in complex, high-threat environments, taking on some tasks traditionally done by Special Forces. It will be seeded from four battalions⁴ It will be established by August 2021 and be part of an Army Special Operations Brigade.

The creation of Combat Service Support Battalions will require fewer separate units of logisticians, electrical and mechanical engineers. The paper does not provide further details of this.

A new experimentation battalion, drawn from the Yorkshire Regiment, will lead in the trialling of cutting-edge technology.

A new Security Force Assistance Brigade will be established to build capacity of allied and partner nations.

A very high readiness Global Response Force, consisting of 16 Air Assault Brigade and a newly formed 1st Combat Aviation Brigade, will support the army’s increased forward presence.

The newly formed Land Operations Command will coordinate the Army’s global engagement.

3rd (UK) Division will remain at the heart of warfighting. The Defence Secretary’s [statement to the House](#) gave this additional detail: third division will have two modernised heavy brigades, built around 148 upgraded Challenger 3 tanks and Ajax armoured reconnaissance vehicles, with an accelerated introduction of Boxer armoured personnel carriers.

1st (UK) Division will be able to operate independently or as part of multilateral deployments.

“Warfighting capability remains the cornerstone of deterrence and the bedrock of a world-class British Army.”

³ This replaces the previous strength target of 82,000, set by the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review.

⁴ 1st battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland, 2nd battalion Princess of Wales Royal Regiment, 2nd battalion, Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment and 4th battalion, the Rifles.

6th (UK) Division will deliver cyber, electronic warfare, information operations and unconventional capabilities designed for warfighting and operations conducted below the threshold of war.

The army will be reorganised into Brigade Combat Teams, drawing on their own dedicated logistics and combat support units. The Paper lists five teams: deep recce strike, air manoeuvre, heavy brigade, light brigade and combat aviation brigade combat teams.

An additional £3 billion will be invested in new army equipment. This includes Ajax and Boxer. 148 main battle tanks will be upgraded to Challenger III while the rest of the fleet will be retired. Warrior will no longer be upgraded and instead remain in service until it is replaced by Boxer in the middle of the decade.

The oldest CH-47 Chinook helicopters will be retired, Watchkeeper will be retained and upgraded, while the four medium lift helicopter platforms will be consolidated to one.

The paper also discusses investment in longer-range artillery and ground based air-defence.

RAF

The RAF will conduct a “radical overhaul” of how it is organised.

Combat Air capacity will grow in the coming years with all seven operational Typhoon squadrons. The RAF will “spiral develop” Typhoon capability with new weapons and the Radar 2 programme.

The Lightning fleet will be increased beyond the 48 aircraft already ordered but does not give numbers.

£4 billion will be invested in the Future Combat Air System (Tempest). The paper says 16 Protector remotely piloted systems will be brought into service. The Defence Secretary’s [statement to the House](#) gave this additional detail: they will replace the nine Reaper drones in 2024.

A number of aircraft will be retired:

- Typhoon tranche 1 aircraft by 2025
- Hawk T1 aircraft
- Bae146 (as planned by 2022)
- C130 Hercules by 2023
- E-3D Sentry in 2021 (to be replaced by three E-7A Wedgetail in 2023)

The paper suggests the RAF will further explore ways to build the capacity of partner nations’ air force, as it is currently doing with the joint Typhoon Squadron with Qatar.

The paper also discusses the spread of the armed forces across all four nations, providing for each the number of serving and civilian personnel, spend with industry, the number of jobs directly supported, and the largest industrial category of spend.

9. A stronger relationship with industry

This section lays out plans for a more strategic relationship with industry and to build a more sustainable industrial base.

Much of the content here is discussed in detail in the separate **Defence and Security Industrial Strategy**, published on 23 March 2021. A separate Commons Library paper will discuss the changes outlined in this new industrial strategy.

10. Transforming our ways of working

This chapter discusses the new Office for Net Assessment and Challenge (SONAC). This office will “challenge the accepted wisdom and way of doing things” and provide a central hub for strategic analysis in Head Office. It will draw on expertise from the civil service, armed forces, academia and business.

The paper also mentions a **Climate Change and Sustainability Strategy**. This will focus on building the resilience of the armed forces to extreme weather conditions, reduce the MOD’s carbon footprint and look at sustainability of operations.

Further Commons Library reading

- [A brief guide to previous British defence reviews](#), February 2020
- [Integrated Review 2021: Summary](#), March 2021
- [Integrated Review 2021: Increasing the cap on the UK’s nuclear stockpile](#), March 2021
- [Global Britain and the Integrated Review in Parliament](#), March 2021
- [International affairs and defence: Parliamentary debates and statements in the 2019-21 session](#), March 2021

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