

Written Submission on The Refresh of the Defence Command Paper and the Future Direction of UK Defence

Submitted by Rethinking Security

April 2023

Scope of submission

With reference to the Defence Command Paper (2021; DCP) and other MOD publications since 2020, as well as the Integrated Review (2021; IR21) and Integrated Review Refresh (2023; IRR23), this submission aims to respond to SONAC's second question:

To what extent should we adhere to the same priorities in UK Defence as those of the past, and what must we change?

1. MOD outreach and challenge

1.1 Rethinking Security welcomes SONAC's call for voluntary submissions to help shape the next Defence Command Paper and the future direction of UK Defence. We have been critical of the last two Cabinet Office-led security reviews and their predecessors for the very limited nature of their external consultation and their reluctance to engage with civil society or parliamentary scrutiny.¹ We note that IRR23 was significantly worse on this score than IR21, lacking any official statement or terms of reference in the public domain, which would explain what the government intended to achieve by the 'refresh', or what questions it was attempting to answer.² The MOD's greater willingness to engage with society on its review is laudable.

1.2 We share with SONAC the view that external challenge is crucial to setting realisable and effective government policy in all sectors. We believe this must include adequate consideration of challenge from those critical of established approaches and those who disagree with some of the central assumptions of existing policy. Transparency and accountability matter; their absence has real consequences for our democracy, the success of national strategy, protection of people's lives, livelihoods and rights, and the allocation of finite resources towards increasing national and human security.

2. Force Posture, expeditionary warfare and persistent global engagement

2.1 UK forces continue to be premised on a global posture with military bases around the world on retained UK territory³ and several former colonies and protectorates⁴, plus

¹ Donaldson, B. & Reeve, R. [Open Societies, Closed Conversations: External Consultation and the Integrated Review](#), Rethinking Security/UNA-UK, December 2021.

² [Letter to PM Rishi Sunak on the 'refresh' of the Integrated Review](#), 16 Nov 2022, co-signed by Rethinking Security, Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy, Airwars, Campaign Against Arms Trade, Gender Action for Peace and Security, Peace Direct, Saferworld, Scientists for Global Responsibility, Shadow World Investigations, Tearfund and United Nations Association-UK.

³ Including Ascension Island, BIOT (Diego Garcia), Sovereign Base Areas (Cyprus), Falkland Islands and Gibraltar.

expeditionary capabilities by land, air and especially sea. While these confer logistical and military advantages to the UK and its allies, they also entail risks to the UK (protection of territory, assets and reputation), greatly raise the potential for entanglements in foreign conflicts, and contribute to insecurity dynamics in regions far distant from the British Isles. It must be stressed that these are also extremely unusual. Other than the P5 powers, only India, Iran, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE arguably have such forward military bases, and then within relative proximity to their home territory.⁵ A military posture that was actually based on defence of UK territory and people would not entail such a costly and risky global force structure. A reasonable rule of thumb when assessing likely reactions to such presence is how the UK might feel about its security were, say, China or Iran to establish a similar sustained military presence in the North Atlantic.

2.2 The expeditionary nature of the British military has been baked into its structure since at least the seventeenth century, developed through four centuries of global imperial conquest and control operations as well as repeated cycles of war in Europe. There are significant and growing challenges to collective European security that dispose the UK to maintain its potential for rapid deployments across the continent – for example, through NATO or the Joint Expeditionary Force. There have also been examples of UK forces rapidly and effectively deployed for civilian protection or conflict management missions (e.g. in Sierra Leone and Macedonia, 2000-03) and with UN peacekeeping missions (e.g. with MINUSMA in Mali, 2020-23). However, the experience of UK involvement in US-led and NATO out-of-area interventions and regime-change operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya in 2001-14 clearly demonstrated the dangers of this global expeditionary posture to the peoples of these countries, to international law and security regimes, to the UK's reputation, prosperity and interests, and to the wellbeing of UK service personnel. Lessons briefly seemed to have been learned the hard way from these overt interventions and their evidenced strategic failures (e.g. via the Chilcot Inquiry and *The Good Operation* handbook, 2016-18⁶) but it is concerning that this no longer seems to guide UK force posture and operations in relation to the increasingly militarised 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific' and the broader concept of 'persistent engagement'.

2.3 In this context, the approach of the Integrated Operating Concept (2020) is particularly concerning due to its assertion that old distinctions between peace and war no longer apply and that the UK should "employ the military instrument to compete below the threshold of war".⁷ This is rightly proclaimed as a fundamental shift in official policy, if not actual practice. It is a contentious and dangerous legal position for the UK to take

⁴ Outside NATO, these currently include Bahrain, Belize, Brunei, Cyprus, Kenya, Oman, Qatar, Singapore and the UAE, with 'rotational deployments' to Australia expected from 2027.

⁵ This does not include Israeli and Moroccan military presence in territory that they have claimed, occupied and administered as their own.

⁶ MOD, *The Good Operation: A handbook for those involved in operational policy and its implementation*, Jan 2018

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674545/TheGoodOperation_WEB.PDF

⁷ MOD, *Integrated Operating Concept* (updated 2021), p.9.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1014659/Integrated_Operating_Concept_2025.pdf

and has major implications, *inter alia*, for parliamentary oversight of armed forces and war powers.⁸ Despite the emphasis on cross-governmental ‘integration’, further developments since DCP21, including the establishment of the Army Special Operations Brigade, have deepened the sense that the MOD is actively seeking a role in an expanding range of localised violent conflicts with minimal democratic oversight or clear strategic direction.⁹ While the intention is to deter more intense ‘warfighting’, the concept spreads the fewer UK personnel ever wider and has clear potential to escalate the UK’s role in multiple conflicts. Its credibility, legality and affordability are all questionable. It is also at odds with evidence on what actually works to build stability in situations of extreme fragility.¹⁰

3. Accountability of Special Forces and PMOs

- 3.1** In the decade since the main drawdown from Afghanistan, partnered military operations (PMOs), sometimes referred to as ‘remote warfare’, have become the predominant form of UK military engagement overseas, seeing the British military training, arming and fighting alongside allied forces, other state militaries and armed opposition groups across the world.¹¹ Military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with casualties among both service personnel and civilians, war crimes committed by British troops, and the drawn-out nature of conflicts, have diminished public appetite for a ‘boots on the ground’ approach.
- 3.2** IOC20, IR21, DCP21, and Future Soldier Guide all gesture towards an even greater role for military partnerships. However, the UK’s policies and practices on civilian harm mitigation have not kept abreast of these developments. For example, the units which play an increasingly important role in UK PMOs, such as the new Ranger Regiment, are not subject to sufficient oversight; and policies on providing ‘security assistance’ need to be strengthened to safeguard against human rights abuses or violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) committed by partners.
- 3.3** In the event that PMOs are utilised, the UK should develop and maintain effective policies and procedures for ensuring the protection of civilians, including by: incorporating a statutory duty not to work with partners with a record or risk of civilian harm or IHL violation;¹² training of partners in IHL requirements; building capacity

⁸ Reeve, R. *Reclaiming the Right to Fight: Global Britain and international law*, Rethinking Security, Aug 2021. <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/2021/08/12/reclaiming-the-right-to-fight/>

⁹ Watson, A. *Different strategy, same mistakes? The UK persistent engagement strategy*, Saferworld, Nov 2021. <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1375-different-strategy-same-mistakes-the-uk-persistent-engagement-strategy>

¹⁰ See, for example, Saferworld’s FCDO-funded work on stabilisation: Attree, L. and Street, J. *No shortcuts to security: Learning from responses to armed conflicts involving proscribed groups*, Saferworld, May 2022; Attree, L. and Watson, A. *How guns fall silent: analysing examples of relative success in integrated stabilisation*, Saferworld, May 2022.

¹¹ We would include within PMOs elements such as: training and mentoring local partners, limiting combat operations to air support, intelligence sharing, and Special Forces operations. For official ICRC definitions of PMOs, see: <https://sri.icrc.org/understanding-support/forms-support/partnered-military-operations>

¹² Ceasefire, for example, recommends the incorporation of UK legislation comparable to the US’s ‘Leahy Laws’. The cross-departmental *Overseas Security and Justice Assistance (OSJA) Human Rights Guidance* and the *Principles relating to the detention and interviewing of detainees overseas and the passing and receipt of intelligence relating to detainees* could be strengthened by placing a statutory duty on ministers not to

(including its own) to investigate, report and respond to civilian harm; establishment and protection of oversight and whistleblowing mechanisms; and developing sustainable disengagement and exit strategies.

- 3.4** The ‘no comment’ policy applied to UK Special Forces operations since the 1980s has been deeply problematic and allowed politicians to cynically deny knowledge of or responsibility for a large number of UK military interventions overseas, including most recently in Ukraine. The post-2020/IOC expansion of such roles to include the Army Special Operations Brigade is concerning. All UK military deployments and operations, including those involving the Ranger Regiment, Joint Counter-Terrorism Training and Advisory Team (JCTTAT)¹³ and UK Special Forces, should be subject to appropriate parliamentary scrutiny, including oversight by the Defence Select Committee or the Intelligence and Security Committee.¹⁴ This is important not just for political transparency but to be able to evaluate the full impact of such operations.

4. The Middle East and autocratic alliances

- 4.1** There is a notable gap in DCP21 (as well as IR21 and IRR23) in relation to the Middle East. There is, for example, no mention at all of Bahrain, arguably the UK’s most active foreign naval base. For all the emphasis on the Indo-Pacific tilt, there remains a much larger concentration of UK military forces in the Gulf States and Iraq than any region outside northern Europe. While it is understandable that the UK may be embarrassed by its close relations with the region’s autocratic rulers and thereby complicity with domestic human rights abuses¹⁵ and destabilising regional activities¹⁶, this does not excuse the occlusion of such activities from official documents and public and parliamentary scrutiny. In light of the nature of these regimes as well as major shifts in global energy systems and the end of its presence in Afghanistan, the MOD should reflect on the desirability of depending on bases in this region, arms sales to their militaries and loan service personnel in key positions. Similar consideration should be given to phasing our support to Brunei’s absolute monarchy.

- 4.2** Also concerning are newer defence relationships that have been pursued in the Eastern Mediterranean, notably with Egypt and Israel, despite their appalling and escalating records of human rights abuses. IRR23 talks of “further deepening and strengthening” strategic partnerships with Israel and the Gulf States¹⁷ and the

proceed with assistance or cooperation where there is knowledge, belief or the existence of a real risk that serious violations of IHL or human rights will take place.

¹³ It is still unclear how scrutiny of the Rangers and JCTTAT will work but the [British Army website](#) already cites them as having been operationally deployed in at least 24 countries (plus the Western Balkans), including some such as Bangladesh, Egypt, Somalia and Saudi Arabia which are among the FCDO’s human rights [Countries of Concern](#) list, and several such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Nigeria that probably should be.

¹⁴ For options and international practice, see Walpole, L and Karlshøj-Pedersen, M. *Britain’s Shadow Army: Policy Options for External Oversight of UK Special Forces*, Oxford Research Group, 2018. <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1278-britainas-shadow-army-policy-options-for-external-oversight-of-uk-special-forces>

¹⁵ Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are officially FCDO Countries of Concern.

¹⁶ For example, Saudi and Emirati violations of IHL in Yemen, alleged funding of extremist Islamist groups by Qatar and Saudi, or alleged close ties between Emirati and Russian intelligence agencies.

¹⁷ HMG, IRR23, p.25.

government has made technological collaboration with Israel a priority.¹⁸ While the Foreign Secretary and IRR23 have talked about the need to engage diplomatically and commercially with ‘middle-ground powers’ on less normative or critical terms, this is quite different than providing them with the military and technical means to enforce oppression, occupation or offensive action abroad. These partnerships and alliances should be urgently rethought in line with the principles of IR21/IRR23 and international legal obligations.

5. New technologies and their regulation

5.1 The UK government has made both scientific development and shaping the international order central to its revised national strategy (IRR23). While we note a preponderance of research and development funding and tax incentives devoted to militarised technology,¹⁹ including AI, quantum technologies and nuclear propulsion, there is an opportunity here for the UK to play a leading role in shaping the regulations – including prohibition, where appropriate – that govern new/next generation military technologies, including cyber, AI and automated, space-based and biological weapons. Irrespective of the behaviour of other states, the UK should, for example, support the negotiation of a new internationally binding instrument to regulate autonomous weapons systems. The National Cyber Force’s new *Responsible Cyber Power in Practice* paper is a useful effort in the direction of shaping new rules. Further efforts in multiple fora should follow, with the benefits of avoiding both costly, destabilising new arms races, and mitigating the potentially existential impacts of technologies like AI and gene-editing. And, for the same reasons, the same energy should be applied to the UK’s existing commitments to progressing multilateral nuclear disarmament.

6. Nuclear accountability

6.1 Nuclear weapons have, like Special Forces, traditionally been screened by a government ‘no comment’ policy and therefore exempt from much of the scrutiny that attends some other areas of defence policy. While the coalition government conducted a Trident Alternatives Review and parliament has voted on the renewal of the Trident programme, other areas of nuclear weapons policy have been exempt from government comment, parliamentary approval and public scrutiny. This is unacceptable, not least because of the extraordinary cost and potentially existential impact of these weapons.

6.2 The UK Replacement Warhead programme was only disclosed in February 2020 due to it being referenced in US Congressional testimony. While the government argues that it has no obligation or precedent to seek parliamentary approval for this

¹⁸ See FCDO, *2030 Roadmap for UK-Israeli Bilateral Relations*, 30 March 2023, sections 3-6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2030-roadmap-for-uk-israel-bilateral-relations/2030-roadmap-for-uk-israel-bilateral-relations>

¹⁹ Reeve, R. *Stick and Twist: UK bets big on existential competition*, Rethinking Security, April 2023. <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/2023/04/04/stick-and-twist-the-uk-bets-big-on-existential-competition/>

programme,²⁰ and it is unlikely that either of the two major parties would oppose it, it is crucial that it should be disclosed and debated fully by parliamentarians and its full costs declared and monitored.²¹ DCPR23 is an opportunity to begin this.

6.3 Unlike the new warhead programme (IRR23) and the lift in the ceiling on warhead stocks (IR21), the government has made no comment on the possibility of the US Air Force redeploying US tactical nuclear weapons to the mainland UK for the first time in 15 years. Again, this has only come to light due to US Congressional scrutiny and relative transparency; the UK government has declined to comment, describing it as an issue of “US spending decisions and capabilities”.²² This is unacceptable and in any other country would be a major foreign policy issue. The DCPR23 is an opportunity to clarify this, as well as the frequent use of UK home and overseas territories for nuclear signalling by US nuclear-armed/capable submarines and bombers.²³

7. Military carbon emissions

7.1 Evidence collated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its latest synthesis report clearly shows that the scale of efforts to limit global warming is insufficient, and that current plans must be more ambitious.²⁴ Without immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors, limiting global warming to 1.5°C is beyond reach. The MOD is responsible for over half of central Government’s carbon emissions and therefore has an absolutely central role to play in meeting national targets towards Net Zero.²⁵ This ‘carbon footprint’ does not include the impact of overseas bases, nor any military equipment (ships, aircraft, tanks, etc.), nor supply chain emissions, nor war-fighting impacts, all currently exempt from reporting and targets.²⁶ The MOD cannot see climate breakdown as simply an operational obstacle, global challenge or threat multiplier.²⁷ It is clear that reducing carbon emissions is essential to protecting the nation, not a desirable addition to policy.

7.2 Increased military spending, procurement and deployments are all likely to increase the military’s climatic and environmental impacts. For example, the Carrier Strike Group 2021 deployment saw HMS Queen Elizabeth lead a fleet displacing some 185,000 tonnes on a voyage of 49,000 nautical miles to Japan and back. As well as other kinds of pollution, this has a very significant carbon output. A study by CEOBS and SGR

²⁰ Mills, C. *Replacing the UK's nuclear deterrent: the long awaited warhead decision*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 8941, March 2021. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8941/CBP-8941.pdf>

²¹ Cullen, D. *Extreme Circumstances: The UK's new nuclear warhead in context*, NIS, Aug 2022.

<https://www.nuclearinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Extreme-Circumstances-Executive-Summary-2.pdf>

²² NIS, *Preparations for US nuclear weapons storage in UK*, NIS, 28 June 2022

<https://www.nuclearinfo.org/article/preparations-for-us-nuclear-weapons-storage-in-uk/>

²³ This includes (in 2022 alone) Diego Garcia, Fairford, Faslane, Gibraltar and the Sovereign Base Areas.

IPCC, *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023* <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/>

²⁵ Parkinson, S. *The environmental impacts of the UK military sector*, Scientists for Global Responsibility, May 2020. <https://www.sgr.org.uk/publications/environmental-impacts-uk-military-sector>

²⁶ Ibid, pp.15-18.

²⁷ Ministry of Defence, DCP21, p.7.

found that higher emissions were typically correlated with higher dependence on air and maritime forces, use of foreign basing and combat operations.²⁸

7.3 Climate action should take the form of an auditable commitment to reducing the overall environmental impact of all military activities and missions. When giving evidence to the Defence Committee's Defence and Climate Change Inquiry, Minister of State Baroness Goldie said, "we need that honesty of information" in regards to setting goals to meet net zero targets and this approach is key.²⁹ She further stated, "It is important that within MoD we make sure we have the governance, the measurement mechanisms and a means of ensuring we know what progress we are making", which is vital to this process.³⁰ The MOD must be able to show progress through robust, comparable and transparent annual reporting that is independently verified.

7.4 Notwithstanding such commitments, it is vital that the MOD avoids the risk of 'carbon tunnel vision' and not simply strive for net zero emissions, but ensures that wider environmental impacts, including land, water and radiological contamination, are included within assessments in decision-making for all procurement, activities, exercises and operations.

About Rethinking Security

Rethinking Security is a network of UK-based organisations, academics and campaigners with expertise in peacebuilding, conflict and security research, human rights, climate and environmental justice, disarmament and demilitarisation.³¹ We have a shared concern that the current approach to national security in the UK and beyond often hampers efforts for peace, justice and ecological sustainability. We are committed to building a much richer understanding of what security really means, and of what is required to build sustainable security. For further information, please see www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk.

This submission was written for Rethinking Security by Richard Reeve, its Coordinator, with input from members of its Political Engagement Working Group, including Stuart Parkinson of Scientists for Global Responsibility, Ellie Kinney of Conflict and Environment Observatory, and Lydia Day of Ceasefire Centre for Human Rights.

²⁸ Parkinson, S. and Cottrell, L. *Estimating the Military's Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, Scientists for Global Responsibility and Conflict and Environment Observatory, Nov 2022 https://ceobs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SGRCEOBS-Estimating_Global_Military_GHG_Emissions_Nov22_rev.pdf

²⁹ Oral evidence: Defence and Climate Change, HC 17, 21 March 2023, Q.158 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/12870/html/>

³⁰ Ibid, Q.161.

³¹ Rethinking Security's organisational members include Campaign Against Arms Trade, CND, Conciliation Resources, Forces Watch, International Alert, Medact, Movement for the Abolition of War, Peace Direct, Quaker Peace And Social Witness, Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network, Saferworld, Scientists for Global Responsibility, United Nations Association – UK, and War on Want. Other members of our Political Engagement Working Group come from: Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy, Airwars, BASIC, Bond, Ceasefire, Conflict and Environment Observatory, Gender Action for Peace and Security, NATO Watch, Protection Approaches, Shadow World Investigations, Tearfund and several universities.