

'All The Warfare Of The Future': Drones, New Technology and the Integrated Review

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At the beginning of March, the government will publish its long-awaited Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, known (thankfully) as ['The Integrated Review'](#). Its purpose is to "define the Government's ambition for the UK's role in the world and the long-term strategic aims for our national security and foreign policy."

When published, the Integrated Review will likely focus on strategy and overarching themes rather than detail specific projects (a White Paper is expected soon after to flesh out equipment plans). However, it is already clear from statements made by ministers and senior military officers that in terms of defence and security, investment in emerging military technology such as direct energy, cyber, AI, and in particular, drones, is seen as key for the UK's 'involvement in the world'.

The clearest indication of this came in Boris Johnson's [statement](#) to the House of Commons on defence spending in late November. Framed as an update on the Integrated Review, the Prime Minister announced a significant budget increase, declaring that UK military spending would be around £190 billion over the next four years. Again and again during his statement, Johnson returned to the government's commitment to , as he put it, 'the new technologies of warfare':

"Our new investment [is] to be focused on the technologies that will revolutionise warfare, forging our military assets into a single network designed to overcome the enemy. A soldier in hostile territory will be alerted to a distant ambush by sensors on satellites or drones, instantly transmitting a warning, using artificial intelligence to devise the optimal response and offering an array of options, from summoning an airstrike to ordering a swarm attack by drones, or paralysing the enemy with cyber-weapons. New advances will surmount the old limits of logistics. Our warships and combat vehicles will carry "directed energy weapons", destroying targets with inexhaustible lasers. For them, the phrase "out of ammunition" will become redundant."

Asked about research and development spending, Johnson added

"There is big, big chunk of this package specifically dedicated to research and development in cyber, AI and drone warfare - all the warfare of the future. The victors of the future will be those who are able to master data and new technology in the way that this package supports."

And Johnson isn't the only one talking up the UK's commitment to drones and new military

technology. Defence Secretary Ben Wallace [suggested](#) last summer that 90% of the RAF's aircraft will be unmanned drones by 2040, insisting that the Army would have to [give up assets such as tanks in order to have more drones](#) and other modern equipment. General Sir Nick Carter, Chief of the Defence Staff, told Sky News on Remembrance Sunday that the British army of the 2030s could include [large numbers of autonomous or remotely controlled machines](#) while leaks to The Times indicated that the size of the British army could be cut by 10,000 as part of '[an increased focus on unmanned drones](#) and vehicles along with enhanced technological capabilities.'

While the direction of travel is increasingly clear, the question to be asked, then, is what is behind the embrace of drones, autonomy and other emerging technology? What does it indicate about how the government sees the UK's role in the world that we are investing so heavily in these systems?

Why are drones so important to Johnson's strategic plans?

Until his abrupt departure as Johnson's key adviser, Dominic Cummings' statements and [actions](#) were often [scrutinised](#) for indications of government thinking on the review.

Cummings and his [writing](#) clearly had a big influence on Boris Johnson and he was for a significant time, a key figure in the Integrated Review. However, it is actually Johnson's Foreign Policy Advisor, [John Bew](#), who was appointed by the PM to lead on the review and has the most influence here. According to insiders who spoke to Charlie Cooper of Politico for his helpful [background sketch](#), it is Bew who is at the helm and "synthesizing" all the disparate elements of the review 'into a single, coherent strategy.'

Image: John Bew, appointed by Boris Johnson to lead the Integrated Review



In broad terms, Bew's position on UK foreign policy can be seen in his [2019 briefing](#) for Policy Exchange's project 'Making Global Britain Work'. Among other recommendations, the briefing argues that the UK must: As a Professor of History and Foreign Policy at King's College, advocate of grand strategy and self-proclaimed realist, Bew would no doubt poor scorn on any suggestion that he was advocating for any particular type of weapon technology or indeed, any one particular means of achieving an overall strategic goal. Nevertheless, a review of Bew's public writing gives an indication of why drones and emerging military technology are receiving such attention and funding from Johnson's government.

- "Pursue a grand strategy of 'creative conservative internationalism' - preserving and defending the best aspects of the 'rules-based international order' but also adopting a more proactive stance: working with allies and stepping forward as a

burden-sharer to help shape a new international system that is amenable to the UK's long-term interests..."

- "Change the way we think about national security: moving away from the risk-management paradigm of recent years ... to bring more dynamism to the way we approach foreign affairs.... Such big-picture thinking can be achieved by looking to our past for inspiration..."
- "Prepare ourselves more effectively for the new age of competition. This means sharpening the UK's competitive edge in all domains of national security and defence (particularly space, cyber and artificial intelligence) ..."
- "Stay ahead of the pack as the most foremost player in European defence. The government should ensure that the UK retains its position as western Europe's leading military power (ahead of France) and America's most reliable ally in the region..."

In his various writing for the New Statesman on defence and foreign policy, we can also see that Bew is what is often delicately described as an 'interventionist'. He is an advocate of using both soft and hard power to secure 'British interests' (what exactly they are, and who gets to define them is generally left unsaid, apparently self-evident). Bew, for example, [castigates](#) those who argue that there needs to be an end-game before any military use of force:

"The idea that we now need to know not only the beginning, but the middle and end of any putative intervention is a formula for perennial inaction. We have never had this luxury and we never will. This is to enter the realm of fantasy foreign policy."

His scorn for parliament's refusal to support air strikes against Assad in Syria in 2013 was laid bare in a New Statesman article '[Are we entering a new age of British isolationism?](#)' in which he argues that the failure to "send a message to Assad" was "a grave blow to Britain's prestige in the world." By stark contrast, four years later Bew hails Trump's airstrike on Syria, [arguing](#) that "the firing of 59 Tomahawk missiles at a military installation is a limited and carefully calibrated use of force... which "affords Trump the opportunity of distinguishing himself from Obama on a humanitarian issue - something that can be forced back down the throats of his liberal critics."

However, as a realist, Bew understands that the UK is no longer the military imperial power it once was. He [argues](#):

'When it comes to military affairs, our usefulness to our allies does not quite fit our self-image. Our much-vaunted counterinsurgency techniques - about which we often lectured the Americans during the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan - took a battering in Basra and Helmand Province. Our understanding of "hearts and minds" has never been quite as acute as we like to think it is. Ironically, it is in the murkier elements of warcraft - special forces operations and intelligence - that we often excel. These are the types of tactics which make us much better equipped for coalition warfare than for going it alone.'

Here we see the roots of what is coming out of the Integrated Review. Bew views the 'murkier elements of warcraft' - special forces and intelligence gathering and dissemination - as something on which the UK can build an international reputation, enable it to have a

say in global affairs, and to engage in interventions with coalitions when necessary.

The days of keeping large forces of troops to enable expeditionary warfare – the Western way of war as he [puts it](#) – is at an end:

“The limits of Western power have been illustrated time and again – nowhere more so than in the Middle East...There has been a loss of appetite for lengthy and complicated foreign entanglements... and of the patience needed to see them through... the political and financial costs of such lengthy campaigns are unsustainable...”

Endless war in the Grey Zone

At the same time, Bew and others argue that the return to ‘Great Power Competition’, that is – as they see it – the strategic rise of China and consequent tension with the US; the assertion of Russian, Turkish and Iranian power in the Middle East as US withdraws; and Russia’s activities in Europe – requires a new British position. The “clear hierarchy of power and authority, tilted decisively in favour of America and its allies” is now “corroded”, [writes](#) Bew.

The consequences of this global strategic change are that Britain must be more engaged in the world Bew argues again and again. He quotes approvingly the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, [arguing](#) that:

“We now live in a much more competitive, multi-polar world and the complex nature of the global system has created the conditions in which states are able to compete in new ways, short of what we would have defined as ‘war’ in the past...”

Carter and Bew are talking of what has become known as fighting in the ‘[grey zone](#)’, that is, being on a war footing and engaging ‘enemies’ but not quite reaching a full-blown war. “Our values and interests are being challenged in the grey zone all over the world,” Defence Secretary Ben Wallace [told](#) Sky News last year before telling multiple interviewers “There is no longer a binary distinction between peace and war.”



The problem with adopting war-time framing and approaches to international relations are [obvious](#). Perceiving and projecting the actions of other states or international actors as belligerent threats increases the likelihood

of escalation. Framing genuine and normal differences between actors in the global arena as 'our interests are being threatened' raises the risk of miscalculation and lowers the threshold for the use of force. Arguing that there is no longer a distinction between peace and war simply means endless war.

However, it appears that such thinking has won out. Ben Wallace [told](#) parliament's House magazine: "While not wishing to prejudge the Integrated Review, I see this as a unique moment to repurpose the UK Armed Forces for an era of constant competition." This will mean embracing new technologies and being "less sentimental" about some older equipment and the way things have always been done – something he describes as "a rebalancing from Industrial Age to Information Age capabilities", including investing in cyber, space, electronic warfare, AI, robotics and autonomy.

A seat at the table

Over the past few years, time and time again we seen large numbers of MPs – mostly on the Tory benches but not exclusively – rail against the reduction in British troop numbers and axing of equipment programmes, seeing it as an indicator that the UK is no longer willing or able to engage militarily as a world power. Of course, in many ways and for many reasons, the UK is no longer a world power in the way that it once was. A proper review of the UK's defence, security and foreign policy would recognise that and put in place an appropriate strategy focused on [sustainable security to tackle issues that face us all](#) such as climate change and global inequality.

However, this review is not prioritising creating genuine security for the UK or the globe. Rather it is an attempt by the Johnson government and its backers to re-position the UK as a global player in order to defend its power.



Here then we see then why Boris Johnson is investing heavily in drones and other emerging military technology. Armed drones like Britain's Reaper and the soon-to-be acquired 'Protector' as well as high-altitude surveillance drones like Zephyr enable the UK to be persistently – if not permanently – deployed in order to undertake long-term surveillance and to engage in strikes and targeted killings when deemed necessary. New drone projects like Mosquito, a 'loyal wingman' drone, as well as swarming drone programmes are to enable the overcoming of defence systems without risking our forces – first strike weapons in effect. Taranis and the new Tempest project are marrying unmanned systems with artificial intelligence to create a gateway towards autonomous weapons, while the launch of a [UK](#)

[Space Command](#) and a [UK Cyber Force](#) will enable the UK to engage in 'data wars' alongside its drone warfare.

In 2014 John Bew [wrote](#) scathingly of David Cameron's government: "There are severe limits to what the UK can do as a middle-ranking power, but it can do better than firefighting every crisis with an emergency meeting of Cobra". These systems and military programmes – and no doubt other ones yet to be revealed – are intended to enable both *overt* overseas interventions without the financial and political cost of unpopular 'lengthy entanglements', and at the same time enable the UK to take a lead in *covert* 'grey zone' warfare. Both will, it is suggested, give the UK power in the global arena, the famed 'seat at the table'.

When published, the Integrated Review will no doubt contain fine phrases and soothing words insisting that the UK is committed to upholding international rules and promising peace, prosperity and security. The reality, as Ben Wallace was happy to [tell](#) Sky News, is that the British military will now be "more forward-deployed" and "prepared for persistent global engagement and constant campaigning."

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