



Why Britain's strategists need to wake up and stop living in the past

By Benedict Baxendale-Smith and Paul Mason

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The United Kingdom's (UK) strategic culture is unfit for the increasingly volatile geopolitical stage. Dominated by an insular demographic and mired in historical ways of thinking, it is slow to adapt to rising challenges facing the free and open international order.
- Five structural habits exist in British strategic culture: a belief in multilateral institutions; a preference for managerialism and incrementalism; disarticulation of doctrines; fatalism over capability/threat mismatch; and a detached security community.
- Five false assumptions also exist: that the UK cannot suffer strategic failure; that civil society will support the state in wartime; that Britain as a multinational union will endure; that the international rules-based order will erode gradually; and that the UK gets to choose when war starts.

The year 2026 has exposed the profound fragility of the contemporary geopolitical landscape. It opened with a sequence of destabilising events: the United States' (US) seizure of Nicolás Maduro, President of Venezuela, followed swiftly by Washington's overtures to annex Greenland – a move that Mette Frederiksen, Prime Minister of Denmark, warned could signal the end of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).¹ As these systemic shocks reverberated around the world, the outbreak of an open US-Israel conflict with Iran placed unprecedented strain on the prevailing international order, NATO's cohesion and global economic stability.

Amid these cascading crises, the machinery of the United Kingdom's (UK) strategic decision-making has faced severe operational and intellectual friction. The Labour government initially attempted to insulate Britain from the unilateral actions of its primary ally through a calculated policy of quiet diplomacy and 'non-narration'. However, as the conflict over Iran intensified, London, alongside its European counterparts, opted for a posture of strictly defensive participation.

This decision threw the structural deficiencies of the British state into sharp relief. Both the sluggish velocity of the UK's strategic response and the palpable shallowing of its deployable military capabilities raised urgent questions regarding the nation's actual readiness for armed conflict in a deteriorating security environment. While Britain has a formalised National Security Strategy (NSS) and an active rearmament programme underpinned by the Strategic Defence Review (SDR), it lacks something far more fundamental: a strategic culture that is viable, resilient, shared between the political class and the public, and aligned with the demands of an era of peer-level competition.²

This Explainer is based on a longer study commissioned by the Secretary of State's Office for Net Assessment and Challenge (SONAC) in the Ministry of Defence (MOD). It critiques the ingrained assumptions, habits, and cognitive blind spots that have come to dominate the thinking of the British national security elite during the post-Cold War era.

Methodologically, it relies on a multi-stage approach: the writers analysed formal state outputs – including the NSS and the SDR – alongside historical literature to establish the baseline strategic text. It also involves expert engagement, utilising semi-structured one-on-one interviews and an off-the-record workshop with active and former civil servants, military officers, and defence and strategic intellectuals.³ Finally, to ensure rigour and mitigate analytical bias, the hypotheses were subjected to a formal red-teaming challenge session led by an expert panel from SONAC. By analysing institutional silences

¹ Miranda Bryant, 'US attack on Greenland would mean end of NATO, says Danish PM', *The Guardian*, 06/01/2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/> (checked: 15/07/2026).

² See: 'National Security Strategy 2025: Security for the British People in a Dangerous World', Cabinet Office, 24/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026) and 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: Secure at home, strong abroad', 02/06/2025, Ministry of Defence, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026).

³ This workshop was hosted by the Council on Geostrategy on 30/07/2025.

alongside official statements, this method stress-tests the underlying assumptions of policymakers in a deteriorating global environment.

Strategic culture in a nutshell

A country's strategic culture is not merely a collection of official policy declarations or organisational wiring diagrams. Rather, it represents an instinctive, cognitive-behavioural response to external threats, shaping how policymakers perceive, prioritise, and react to international challenges. Conditioned over centuries by geography, demographics, institutional legacies, and technological shifts, strategic culture manifests as a set of long-term assumptions, traditions, and reflexes shared across a state's military, diplomatic, intelligence, and political elites.⁴ These instincts operate continuously, sometimes pronounced explicitly, but more often acting as an unexamined subtext.

While formal institutions are designed to draft and execute grand strategy, states rarely codify their ultimate geopolitical ambitions in a single open source. Instead, grand strategy must be decoded from periodic policy rollouts, threat assessments, and operational commands. In the British context, this formal apparatus is heavily supplemented by an informal 'security community'. This decentralised ecosystem comprises military officers, civil servants, defence academies, intelligence personnel, security-focused politicians, experts and academics, defence industry executives, and journalists.

London's think tanks and historic private members' and service clubs serve as vital nodes within this community, facilitating unclassified yet deeply privileged debates that establish both the zeitgeist and the boundaries of acceptable strategic thought. The culture therefore relies on a shared professional lexicon, historical folklore, and authoritative, non-official texts that subtly signal policy direction. The silences must be analysed as closely as the statements, evaluating the underlying subtext alongside the official public narrative.

The origins and evolution of British strategic culture

The term 'strategic culture' has faced conceptual ambiguity since its formulation in the 1970s by Jack Snyder.⁵ Its utility was historically diluted as academic debate drifted from international relations toward cultural studies. This disconnect is felt within the state apparatus itself; one former British defence minister admitted to the authors that they had never encountered the term during their entire professional tenure.⁶ To serve as a practical tool for self-analysis, this assessment

⁴ Jack Snyder, 'The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options', RAND Corporation, 09/1977, <https://www.rand.org/> (checked: 15/07/2026).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Personal interview.



employs a precise definition that broadens classical frameworks to incorporate conventional military doctrine, statecraft, and the spontaneous, emergent interactions of the contemporary security community.

Historically, the UK's strategic culture has favoured empirical adaptation over rigid theoretical models. As Kenneth Waltz observed in the 1960s, the British foreign policy establishment possesses a distinct habit of 'proceeding empirically, of eschewing scientific analysis and criticism on intellectual or theoretical grounds, of preferring common sense to abstract reasoning.'⁷ This instinct for 'muddling through' survived the UK's mid-20th century transition from a superpower to a European nuclear power that pursues its foreign and defence policy as part of a regional alliance.

This empiricism is a product of geographic and historical continuities that have persisted since the late 17th century. As an island nation, Britain's survival has historically depended on command of the sea.⁸ Concurrently, the state has maintained a preference for small, highly professionalised armed forces rather than mass conscript armies, expanding its military footprint only during times of existential global conflict. This structural reality has fostered a national identity that views the UK as a natural arbiter of global security, bound by a duty to uphold international law, maritime freedom, and collective security frameworks, especially NATO.

Probably the most fundamental assumption in British strategic culture is that the UK has a 'special relationship' with America. Britain has viewed itself as a 'bridge' between North America and Europe, voluntarily dependent on US power through arrangements such as the Five Eyes intelligence network, the Trident nuclear weapons programme, and unparalleled integration with the American armed forces.⁹

This geostrategic outlook has historically reduced strategic thinking into a series of rigid binaries: global versus continental, maritime versus land, and economic versus kinetic warfare. For the first half of the 20th century, the British elite consistently favoured the global, maritime, and economic levers of national power, shifting toward continental land warfare and high-intensity kinetics only when the international order collapsed into total war.

Unlike peer competitors, British strategists are rarely driven by romantic notions of historic destiny or ethnic exceptionalism. Their structural reflex is crisis management: delaying conflict through diplomatic mediation, minimising the expenditure of domestic blood and treasure, and seeking strict domestic and international legal mandates for any military intervention. This defensive prudence

⁷ Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1968).

⁸ Andrew Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2021).

⁹ The 'bridge' metaphor was invoked most recently by Jonathan Reynolds, then Secretary of State for Business and Trade. See: Chas Geiger, "'No durable peace" in Ukraine if Europe not in talks – minister', *BBC News*, 16/02/2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026).

is captured by Winston Churchill's maxim: 'In defeat, defiance.'¹⁰ Yet, this very preference for incremental improvisation has created a growing mismatch between reality and elite perception in an era where the international order is fracturing under the weight of five-domain, sub-threshold warfare.

Put bluntly, what was true in the decades when today's political, military, and civil service leadership were educated may not be true today, and history is littered with elites whose defeats were mandated by their slow process of adaptation to reality.

How the UK makes strategy: Formal and informal

The formal architecture of British grand strategy has undergone significant transformation since the end of the Cold War. The initial post-Cold War era relied on infrequent defence white papers and the annual Statement of the Defence Estimates (SDE). Early initiatives like 1990's 'Options for Change' focused primarily on downsizing tri-service capabilities to reap a 'peace dividend', rather than re-evaluating the underlying security landscape. By 1998, the incoming Labour government overhauled this process with the Strategic Defence Review, which was later appended with a 'New Chapter' following the 11th September 2001 terrorist attacks to pivot the state toward expeditionary counter-terrorism.

However, the subsequent military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan exposed severe institutional deficits. The consistent failure to define clear, achievable strategic outcomes led to sharp domestic criticism. In 2010, the Public Accounts Committee in the House of Commons complained that 'we have all but lost the capacity to think strategically. We have simply fallen out of the habit, and have lost the culture of strategy-making.'¹¹ In response, David Cameron, then Prime Minister, established the National Security Council (NSC) in 2010, formalising a five-year cycle intended to synchronise the National Security Strategy with the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).

Despite this formalisation, the NSC has frequently operated as a reactive, short-term crisis-management clearinghouse rather than a crucible for long-term geostrategic thinking. The strategic review process routinely degenerates into intense inter-service budgetary rivalries, exposing friction between the operational demands of the MOD, the diplomatic priorities of the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), and the fiscal constraints of His Majesty's (HM) Treasury. Consequently, as with the 2026 dispute over the Defence Investment Plan, the strategic outputs of the state are frequently compromised by immediate financial considerations.

¹⁰ Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948).

¹¹ 'Who does national strategy?', House of Commons Public Administration Committee, 18/10/2010, <https://publications.parliament.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026).



Furthermore, there remains a disconnect between analytical horizon-scanning and political implementation. The MOD's 'Global Strategic Trends' report is globally respected for its 30-year projections of demographic, technological, and geopolitical shifts, yet its findings are rarely integrated into the short-term horizons of incoming prime ministers, most of whom assume office with minimal exposure to strategic theory.¹² This deficit has forced a reliance on the politically appointed National Security Adviser (NSA) and the National Security Secretariat, leaving the British system without a clearly defined political centre for the formation of national strategy.

This formal insulation is mirrored within the informal networks that underpin the security elite. While defence institutes like the Royal College of Defence Studies, the UK Defence Academy, select universities, and think tanks provide essential spaces for intellectual challenge, they often lack demographic and professional diversity. The traditional security cohort remains predominantly male, white, middle-aged, privately educated, and drawn from insular ex-military or ex-intelligence backgrounds. This demographic homogeneity insulates British strategists from the broader shifts occurring within contemporary civil society, business, and finance, reinforcing an institutional echo chamber that avoids rigorous public accountability.

The ten habits and flaws of British strategic culture

The sociological and institutional reality of British strategy has produced a series of structural habits and assumptions that mire British strategic culture with systemic vulnerabilities. Our aim in listing them is to prompt people at all levels of decision-making to ask: what if these habits are bad, and the assumptions false?

Five structural habits

- 1. A blind belief in multilateral institutions and legal frameworks:** Following the post-1945 era, the UK consciously subsumed its great power identity within NATO and the United Nations (UN). This history has left the security elite with an ingrained bias toward multilateral institutions and international legal frameworks. Faced with a revisionist challenge, Whitehall instinctively seeks a diplomatic, rules-based remedy, leaving the nation vulnerable to competitors who actively reject or manipulate international law.
- 2. A preference for managerialism and incrementalism:** Rooted in a political

¹² 'Global Strategic Trends: Out to 2055', Ministry of Defence, 27/09/2024, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026).



tradition that favours gradual evolutionary change, British governance rejects abrupt, revolutionary transformations. In the civil service, this has manifested as a managerial, corporate ethos that fosters a culture of ‘learned helplessness’. This dynamic encourages risk aversion, excessive secrecy, and an over-reliance on improvisation – operating on the assumption that the state can successfully invent solutions after a crisis has already begun.

- 3. The disarticulation of nuclear and conventional doctrines:** The Continuous At-Sea Deterrent (CASD) occupies an isolated, highly sacrosanct operational space decoupled from conventional warfighting doctrine. This is epitomised by the ‘Letters of Last Resort’ – a handwritten directive penned by an incoming prime minister on their first day in office. This process reduces nuclear deterrence to an isolated command loop. As nuclear strategy was historically removed from the broader military establishment’s curriculum following the retirement of air-dropped nuclear weapons in 1998, the wider defence community lacks an integrated understanding of the sub-strategic escalation pathways that are emerging from the evolution of Russian and Chinese doctrines.¹³
- 4. Fatalism regarding the capability/threat mismatch:** There is an institutionalised fatalism within Whitehall regarding the gap between the UK’s conventional military capabilities and the escalating global threat matrix. Decades of structural underfunding have left permanent ‘black holes’ in the equipment budget, yet consecutive strategic reviews continue to commit the state to expansive global objectives without securing the necessary financial means. Since Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, none of the seven subsequent administrations has broken free of this pattern of failure.
- 5. A security community detached from cultural and financial elites:** The traditional British security elite remains not only separate from the demos; it is also culturally and demographically isolated from the financial and corporate networks that drive modern society. Many globally integrated British financial institutions maintain structural biases against defence sector investments, driven by Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria. Due to the minimal career fluidity between the civilian corporate world and the security apparatus, the defence community struggles to leverage the rapid innovations occurring in the private sector. Historically, societies where the ‘warrior caste’ diverges culturally both from the people and the commercial elite have rarely achieved strategic success.

¹³ See: William Freer and Peter Watkins, ‘Rebuilding the ladder: Options for boosting Britain’s nuclear posture’, Council on Geostrategy, 28/04/2026, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026).



Five false assumptions

1. **‘The UK cannot suffer catastrophic failure’:** Geographic isolation and a long history of avoiding foreign occupation have insulated the British psyche from the trauma of state collapse. As a result, the UK security elite has focused on ‘positional security’ – preserving international prestige and rank within frameworks like the UN Security Council – rather than planning for absolute national survival. It treats the prospect of high-intensity conflict with the assumption of eventual victory, ignoring the risk of strategic defeat and state failure.
2. **‘Civil society will always support the state in wartime’:** British strategic planning assumes that civil society will automatically mobilise and accept significant material sacrifices during a peer-level crisis. This overlooks the fragmented reality of the modern public square, where public trust in state institutions remains low. Polling data underscores this vulnerability: while 82% of citizens agree that a direct threat to the British homeland justifies military action, only 52% support intervention if a treaty ally comes under attack.¹⁴ Furthermore, 60% of the electorate would reject increased defence spending if it necessitated budget cuts to the National Health Service (NHS).¹⁵
3. **‘Britain will endure as a functional multinational state’:** Crucial defence, intelligence, and industrial assets are distributed across the four nations of the UK on the assumption of permanent constitutional stability. Surface warship manufacturing is concentrated on the Clyde, the CASD infrastructure is stationed at Faslane, and weapons systems are manufactured across Northern Ireland and Wales. Yet, the integrity of the British union is actively contested by legitimate democratic parties within the devolved parliaments, representing an unexamined risk to the basing infrastructure of the British Armed Forces.
4. **‘The rules-based international order will only erode gradually’:** The UK’s strategic elite has consistently operated on the linear assumption that the post-Cold War international order will decay at a slow, predictable pace. This has caused Britain to be repeatedly blindsided by swift geopolitical shifts. By framing systemic collapse as a gradual process, British strategic culture struggles to plan for a sudden, non-linear evaporation of the international legal architecture. Although in 2025 the NSS came close to contemplating a rapid breakdown scenario, it is not clear that its conclusions have been fully

¹⁴ Milan Dinic, ‘Part Four: The UK and the prospect of War’, YouGov, 24/05/2024, <https://yougov.co.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026).

¹⁵ Evie Aspinall and Eliza Keogh, ‘UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs – Annual Survey 2025’, British Foreign Policy Group, 17/07/2025, <https://bfpbg.co.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026).



internalised across the Whitehall system.¹⁶

- 5. ‘The UK gets to choose when the war starts’:** Perhaps the most persistent pathology within British strategic planning is the belief that the UK retains ultimate control over the timeline of conflict. This trap echoes the interwar ‘Ten Year Rule’, which suppressed defence industrial capacity until it was abandoned in 1932. Extant strategy documents fail explicitly to face the possibility of absolute strategic surprise initiated by an adversary.

Recommendations for action

Strategic culture is a deep and pervasive discourse that cannot be easily altered overnight by administrative fiat or intellectual intervention. However, historic precedents demonstrate that national reflexes can change rapidly under the pressure of external events or internal challenge. To address current vulnerabilities, Britain’s security elite should, as a first step, acknowledge the habits and assumptions described above as potentially flawed. Each relevant institution – military schools, devolved governments, Whitehall departments, and businesses in the security and defence sphere – should initiate a formal audit process of their strategic assumptions (see Annex 1 for a checklist to help identify if habits or assumptions underpin strategic concepts).

Whitehall should move away from a culture of excessive secrecy, engage directly with the public, and broaden its focus beyond the small network of royal institutes. Strategic policymakers, civil servants, and military commanders should be asked to articulate their underlying assumptions clearly, exposing them to intellectual scrutiny.

The state should consider adopting a modernised version of Dwight Eisenhower’s 1953 ‘Project Solarium’ – a structured exercise designed to bring competitive analysis and institutional rigour to strategy formulation by pit-testing distinct, adversarial courses of action before an independent panel of experts.

Concurrently, HM Government should foster an open dialogue with the electorate regarding the realities of modern peer conflict, replacing historical myths with assertive realism to navigate the fragmented geopolitical landscape. In this dialogue, institutions not traditionally considered authoritative in geostrategy should play an active role. The new Mayoral Strategic Authorities, for example, will have resilience duties; they should also have a voice in national strategy formation. So should the non-Christian religious communities of the UK and the non-unionist political parties.

¹⁶ ‘National Security Strategy 2025: Security for the British People in a Dangerous World’, Cabinet Office, 24/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/07/2026).



Out of such dialogue, the aim should be an enhanced strategic literacy among British citizens. As a new prime minister prepares to take office, they inherit plans for a 'National Conversation on Defence', which has barely begun and whose premises deserve to be interrogated.

The UK's political system has produced seven prime ministers in ten years, with widely differing approaches to geopolitics. The country's allies have a right to ask: what endures? The British people have a right to ask: is what endures correct? The new leadership should challenge the pathologies that have stunted British strategic thought.

Political leaders across the spectrum need to acknowledge the uncoded assumptions that guide British strategic policy. As the security environment worsens, it is time to subject the most basic assumptions of Britain's strategic culture to the rigour of evidence, analysis, and debate, and for that debate to include everyone with a stake in its outcome.

This paper is an abridged version of a longer research paper commissioned by the Secretary of State's Office of Net Assessment and Strategic Challenge (SONAC) in the Ministry of Defence. This shorter, updated version has been approved for release to the wider public.



Annex 1

A challenge checklist for the UK's strategists

As British strategists formulate foreign and defence policy, and make operational decisions in terms of resilience, industrial strategy, and countering sub-threshold attacks, the authors propose the following checklist. This aims to help them to challenge ingrained assumptions and provoke constructive debate. Policymakers are advised to assess the proposed course of action, or strategy statement, against the following questions:

1. Will it survive the serious degradation or collapse of multilateralism and the international rules-based order?
 - a. If not, are there alternatives and fallbacks?
2. Does it require improvisation if the reasonable worst-case scenario occurs?
 - a. If so, who would lead the improvisation and are the resources needed double counted for some other purpose?
3. [If relevant] Does it align with the UK's nuclear doctrine? Does it leave deterrence and escalation ladders coherent in face of the threat?
4. Do the resources and capabilities allocated match the threat?
 - a. If not, is this inevitable, or the result of institutional fatalism?
5. Would the British population support it, including the business, financial, and cultural thought leaders who can promote the course of action?
 - a. If not, what can be done to create alignment?
6. Does it assume victory?
 - a. If so, on what grounds?
 - b. What are the quantified risks of catastrophic failure?
7. Does it assume the British population will support the state in wartime, or in an escalated sub-threshold conflict?
 - a. If in doubt, what mitigations are built into the course of action?
8. Does it assume the survival of the UK as a four-nation state?
 - a. If not, what fallbacks are built in for the eventuality of the union's breakup?
9. Does it include the eventuality of sudden and unpredictable changes in the global threat environment?
10. Does it assume that Britain can control the timetable of escalation?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benedict Baxendale-Smith is a doctoral researcher in the Department of Defence Studies at King's College London. **Paul Mason** is a journalist, author and political consultant. Both are Adjunct Fellows at the Council on Geostrategy.

“Dedicated to making Britain, as well as other free and open nations, more united, stronger, and greener.”

ISBN: 978-1-917893-29-9

Address: Alliance House, 12 Caxton Street, London, SW1H 0QS

Phone: 020 3915 5625

Email: info@geostrategy.org.uk

© 2026 Council on Geostrategy

Disclaimer: This publication should not be considered in any way to constitute advice. It is for knowledge and educational purposes only. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council on Geostrategy or the views of its Advisory Board.

Please do not print this document; protect the environment by reading it online.

Geostrategy Ltd., trading as Council on Geostrategy, is a company limited by guarantee in England and Wales. Registration no. 13132479. Registered address: Geostrategy Ltd., Alliance House, 12 Caxton Street, London, SW1H 0QS.