



Policy Paper 164

POLICY PAPER 164

STRENGTH,
RESILIENCE AND
PARTNERSHIP:
SECURING
BRITAIN AND
DEFENDING
LIBERALISM IN
TURBULENT
TIMES



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1 Introduction

1.1 The challenge to liberalism and a stable world order

1.1.1 Liberal Democrats are committed to building a fair, free and open society, and to defending the core values upon which such openness, freedom and fairness are founded, both at home and abroad. Robust defence of national security, protection of fundamental freedoms, and commitment to multilateral cooperation remain indivisible facets of modern liberal democracy. Liberal Democrats have a proud tradition of standing up for what we believe in, and of defending our values, our country and the international order against those who pursue authoritarian or narrow nationalistic goals to the detriment of others. This is plain to see in our dedication to Ukraine's fight for its freedom, our stout defence of our armed forces and in our willingness to challenge those who seek to undermine our democratic institutions from within or without.

1.1.2 In recent years, however, the underpinning principles of liberal democracy have come under sustained and severe pressure, and so has our national security. The United Kingdom faces urgent and stark challenges driven by heightened great-power competition, rapid technological advances, climate change, and the erosion of respect for long-standing democratic norms, international law, and multilateral institutions. A period of relative stability since the end of the Cold War has given way to deep uncertainty, upheaval and turbulent change.

1.1.3 Expectations that the post-Cold War world would bring an inevitable spread of liberal democratic norms and a reduction in security threats were misplaced. Instead, liberalism faces its gravest challenge since the Second World War. We must reckon with a more contested global

environment in which authoritarian modes of governance, democratic backsliding and disregard for international commitments are increasingly prevalent, and the outlook for arms control and conflict prevention is poor. These challenges are necessarily global, and our allies and like-minded partners face them too. But for the UK, it is the dramatic shift in the state of European security which is most pressing, and which must be addressed if liberalism is to flourish in our country and on our continent.

1.1.4 Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine shattered an already fraying post-Cold War European security settlement. Putin cast aside Ukrainian sovereignty in favour of the "might is right" principle of "spheres of influence" and nationalistic claims to a "Greater Russia". At home and abroad, his regime has little concern for civil liberties or human rights. With the use of military force, or intimidating threats of its use, and "grey zone" activities via domestic political interference and cyber-attacks, his regime is a clear and present threat to European security. The UK and our European allies are indebted to the bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people in their fight against Russian aggression. We must continue to stand with them in their fight.

1.1.5 However, while Europeans would once have been confident of American support in seeking to stand up to blatant Russian aggression on our continent, President Trump praised Putin's invasion of Ukraine as 'genius', withdrew critical intelligence sharing agreements, ended direct funding for Ukraine and plans to withdraw critical military assets from Europe. His return to office and the conduct of his foreign policy has therefore posed a profound challenge for the UK and our European allies.

1.1.6 Since the Second World War, the US has underwritten a global order, which while imperfect, delivered a long and unprecedented period of international stability. Yet in the first eighteen months of Trump's second

presidency, we have seen how quickly long-standing assumptions about American leadership can be upended, and how exposed this leaves the UK and our European allies. Trump has shown scant regard for the multilateral international order that his predecessors helped to shape. That order is now more fragile than at any point in generations.

1.1.7 This sea change in political outlook in Washington is particularly difficult for the UK, which has long benefited from a deep and multifaceted relationship with the US. The UK has accepted a high degree of interdependence - and often outright dependence - on the US in matters of national security, not least for our nuclear and conventional military capabilities and for intelligence sharing. It has been a relationship of great importance to the UK and brought mutual benefits. Yet those decades of deep trust have been severely undermined by President Trump's direct threats to the territorial integrity of our close allies Canada and Denmark, and by his desire to "punish" his European allies over their lack of support for his war with Iran.

1.1.8 The threat from Russia and uncertainty over the extent of American support are not, however, the only challenges we face. China's ambition to become the dominant global power through its control of critical minerals and technological advances creates systemic vulnerabilities for our national security, including through supply chain dependencies and risks to our critical infrastructure.

1.1.9 We cannot assume that a change of leader in Russia, China - or the US - will result in greater enthusiasm for liberal democracy or commitment to a fair, values-based and rules-based international order. The US remains formally committed to NATO and its Article V mutual defence clause, and there remains considerable support for NATO among the US public and in Congress. However, much as we hope that a post-Trump America will

rekindle its liberal values and restore its unequivocal commitment to European security, we cannot base our international security policy upon an assumption that this will happen. Regardless of the future political orientation of the US, Europeans must therefore take on far greater responsibility for their own defence.

1.1.10 Events over the past few months, including espionage, sabotage and political interference, have underlined the presence of the direct threat to our national security presented by Russia, China and Iran here in the UK and across Europe.

1.1.11 These events have also led to security challenges on our own streets. Threats to the UK and its liberal democratic way of life are not only military in form but increasingly take the form of “hybrid” attacks, targeting supply chains and cyber networks, interfering in domestic politics, and undermining the morale and understanding of our citizens. We must do more to improve our national resilience at home.

1.1.12 Conflict in the Middle East has also underscored the persistent and deep challenges to securing a long-term peace in the region. In Israel and Palestine, the prospect of progressing a two-state solution has been seriously undermined in recent years by the actions of extremists in both societies. Britain must show leadership in keeping the possibility of a two-state solution alive - as the only political settlement which can deliver peace, dignity and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. Forthcoming legislative elections in both Israel and Palestine could deliver a change in the key political actors in both states. The UK must be ready to work with international partners to generate fresh momentum around advancing the two-state solution.

1.1.13 Regrettably, Brexit has made it more difficult for the UK to work closely with our European allies to tackle the challenges we face. It is now

widely accepted that the UK has paid a significant economic price for leaving the EU, but it is increasingly clear that there are also costs to our national security. The friction caused by Brexit remains a challenge; over the last decade, the EU has become a more significant actor in defence policy, particularly as regards military capability development. The UK has not been at the table while the EU has sought to establish its own structures for financing, developing and acquiring capabilities. We must build closer working relationships with our European NATO allies, the vast majority of whom are also EU Member States.

1.2 Securing Britain, defending liberalism

1.2.1 Liberal Democrats believe the UK must confront the reality that some of the most critical assumptions which shaped its post-Cold War security policy no longer hold. It is necessary to rethink how best to protect British national security interests and advance our liberal values in this unfamiliar environment. The UK needs an international security policy that is both robust and adaptable to the broad range of circumstances that may emerge from the present upheaval.

1.2.2 Where we agree with the Government's aims, Liberal Democrats will be supportive; indeed, we agree with much of the analysis and recommendations of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR). Yet we also believe that there are vital areas of policy and decision-making on which Labour has lacked the necessary sense of urgency and vigour in pursuing changes to national security policy. This paper therefore seeks to focus on policy proposals in four key areas: strengthening UK defences, deepening cooperation with allies, building national resilience and defending the principle and practice of multilateralism.

1.3 Strengthening the UK's defences

1.3.1 Liberal Democrats support the core analysis and recommendations of the Government's SDR. We support the principle of a "NATO first" defence policy and the maintenance of continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence. We support greater funding for defence and meeting NATO spending targets. And we support efforts to ensure that increased defence spending should, where possible, drive economic growth and technological innovation and help address regional economic disparities.

1.3.2 However, we believe that the recommendations of the SDR have not been properly resourced, nor pursued with sufficient urgency and vigour. The UK's armed forces will need greater funding over a sustained period. This will require difficult fiscal choices, but more spending must go together with a ruthless focus on competence and efficiency in the procurement of capabilities, as well as deeper and more structured cooperation with allies. The UK must also consider, together with European allies, the degree to which our military capabilities can in future be autonomously developed and operated. Liberal Democrats will therefore:

- Meet the NATO spending target of 3.5 per cent of GDP on core defence requirements and a further 1.5 per cent on "defence and security related spending" by 2035, reaching 3 per cent by 2030.
- Ensure that in meeting these targets, spending prioritises the most urgent capability needs and investment in new technologies identified by the SDR.
- Kickstart investment in the regeneration of our armed forces by raising £20bn through the sale of defence bonds.
- Increase transparency, scrutiny and accountability of the Ministry of Defence (MoD), including through new bodies, such as a

dedicated House of Commons Defence Public Accounts Committee.

- Conduct a full assessment on the degree to which UK military capabilities need in the medium-to-long term to be fully sovereign, developed and operated with allies or acquired internationally “off the shelf”.

1.4 Defending liberalism together: deeper cooperation with allies

1.4.1 Liberal Democrats want to see a strong US commitment to European security through NATO. However, while we note the attitude of the Trump administration, we also recognise that regardless of the political outlook of future American presidents, Europeans will have to take far greater responsibility for their own security. Liberal Democrats will therefore:

- Maintain and deepen British support to Ukraine, including through continued financial, diplomatic and military support.
- Seek to join the EU Single Market, providing full access to, and greater influence over, EU defence capability funding and development programmes, such as SAFE, EDF and EDIP.
- Support pooling, sharing and specialisation initiatives which increase the effectiveness and efficiency of European defence.
- Propose to European allies the creation of a European Security Council (ESC), tasked with providing strategic leadership on defence industrial rationalisation and the joint development and operation of military capabilities, in order to better support the delivery of NATO's operational requirements.

- Seek UK involvement in EU military and civilian missions and deepen long-term EU-UK cooperation via diplomatic and military exchange programmes.

1.5 A more resilient United Kingdom

1.5.1 Just as the end of the Cold War resulted in the UK and others scaling back their armed forces, so the UK also abandoned a policy of preparedness and civil defence in the face of potential armed conflict in favour of an approach focused primarily on civil emergencies. This has had an impact on our ability as a society to withstand the rigours of potential conflict, including the challenges of new forms of hybrid and grey zone warfare. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a sharp increase in hostile hybrid and grey zone activity by state actors have made it clearer than ever that strengthening the UK's resilience to emergencies stemming from military conflict, hybrid warfare or other crises must be treated as a national priority.

1.5.2 Successive governments have sought to address this but have not risen to the challenge. Recommendations from the SDR and the National Resilience Action Plan remain unimplemented. Committed as we are to robust defence based on strong alliances, Liberal Democrats are deeply concerned about this lack of urgency on the home front. We will therefore:

- Establish a new Civil Defence Office as a government department to coordinate and strengthen whole-of-society resilience.
- Create a new Civil Volunteer Reserve to ensure that necessary skills can be made available to a national effort at short notice.
- Start building whole-of-society resilience with a serious but calm national conversation to raise public awareness of what is at stake.

- Ensure that the UK meets its resilience commitments to NATO under Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

1.6 The UK and the international order: defending multilateralism

1.6.1 A stable and fair international order based on the UN's founding principles is in our national interest. Guided by our values of liberty, equality, democracy, community, human rights, internationalism, and environmentalism, Liberal Democrats remain strongly committed to international law and the rules-based order. The UK must use all its diplomatic skill and influence in our multilateral system to defend what matters to us.

1.6.2 Where adaptation or reform is necessary or inevitable in a changing world, we will work with like-minded partners as a strong voice in defence of multilateralism built on principles including sovereignty and fundamental freedoms. As attacks on liberalism and democratic principles increase in the present turbulent global environment, Liberal Democrats will therefore:

- Defend global institutions and norms which are critical to our national security and prosperity.
- Work with Canada and other like-minded 'middle powers' to develop an effective cooperation mechanism as a counterweight to states seeking to undermine multilateralism and the international rules-based order.
- Prioritise efforts to strengthen or develop international agreements on new technologies including autonomous weapons, and on risks relating to the use of space.

- Inject greater urgency into multilateral efforts to deliver effective global governance relating to AI that protects the safety and security of our citizens.
- Push polar and maritime security issues higher up domestic and international agendas.

2 A turbulent world - threats to international security

2.1 “The return of history”: great power rivalry and authoritarianism

2.1.1 The post-Cold War era, with its optimistic vision of an “end of history” and an inevitable spread of Western liberal democracy across the world, is over. While the shape of a new global order is still emerging, there are worrying echoes of the prewar era, a “balancing” system of great powers competing over narrow self-interests, acute economic and technological competition and weak international institutions.

2.1.2 In Russia, almost from the outset of his presidency, Putin made no secret of his regret at the collapse of the USSR, nor of his political ruthlessness and contempt for liberal democracy. His disregard for international rules was clear at least from the 2006 Litvinenko assassination, and his territorial ambitions, destabilising actions and belief in a Russian sphere of influence became progressively clearer, though the international community was slow to take the threat seriously until the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea, the 2018 attempted Skripal assassination, and of course the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

2.1.3 In parallel, the phenomenally swift rise of China as a modern economic, technological and military power created a serious rival to the previously unchallenged US. The consequent shifts in the global economic order, and the emergence of significant new resource and technological dependencies, pose profound challenges to middle powers and to Europeans collectively. The new international era is also one of heightened ideological competition with authoritarian and repressive states such as

China, Russia, Iran and North Korea (the so-called “CRINK” states) willing to cooperate where their interests align and provide pragmatic mutual support against democratic interests. Russia has only been able to sustain its war against Ukraine with the support it has received from China, Iran and North Korea.

2.1.4 The most shocking development of our time, however, has been the increasing alignment of the US with the ‘might is right’ worldview and implicit acceptance of spheres of influence, at least in the rhetoric and actions of the Trump presidency. Even longstanding allies of the US have been subjected to interventions in domestic politics, with tirades over migration policies and claims of “civilisational erasure”. Trump has even threatened to make Canada ‘the 51st state’ and annex Greenland. All this has undermined confidence in the US as an ally and created a new and deep rift in the transatlantic alliance over fundamental values.

2.1.5 Meanwhile, new technologies have revolutionised warfare. The battlefield in the Russo-Ukrainian war - and in the Gulf - has demonstrated how drones and other autonomous equipment are changing how wars will be fought. This battlefield experience has also confirmed how “critical enablers” gathering intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) are vital to any military campaign. Access to ISR and cloud computing, and harnessing the military potential of AI effectively, will be a *sine qua non* for military operations in future, with profound implications for the capability choices of armed forces.

2.1.6 While military capabilities continue to develop, so too does so-called “hybrid” or “grey zone” warfare through which hostile states take advantage of deep technological and economic interdependencies to subvert a target country with actions below the threshold of war, which are often deniable. Tactics include targeting critical national infrastructure via

cyber-attacks and sabotage, disinformation and infiltration, economic coercion and instrumentalised migration. These threats will require new approaches to defence and deterrence and deeper cooperation among allies. Above all, liberal democracies will need to find ways to increase their resilience to these tactics, and that will require a “whole-of-society” effort.

2.1.7 In a world of competing great powers increasingly pursuing narrow self-interest abroad and authoritarianism at home, the multilateral institutions that Americans and Europeans did so much to foster in the postwar period are facing considerable challenges. Yet the world still needs cooperation over threats that no single country can manage, whether climate change, arms control or the consequences of rapid technological advances in areas such as AI, biotechnology and quantum computing.

2.1.8 Today, we live in a transitional period. Although economic power is shifting from West to East, authoritarian regimes need not last forever; although they exude invincibility, they are often fragile. With the right resources, necessary resolve and through close cooperation and solidarity, liberal democracies should be able to face the future with confidence.

2.1.9 The following section sets out key threats to UK security in more detail. The remainder of the paper then addresses those threats, showing how the Liberal Democrats would seek to strengthen the UK’s military defences and national resilience, and build partnerships with allies and through mini-lateral groupings and multilateral institutions.

2.2 Putin’s Russia and the threat to Europe

2.2.1 Since at least the early 2000s, the Russian threat to European security has been growing. With its intimidating military exercises and operations against Georgia and Ukraine, and with growing hybrid attacks across Europe, by the mid-2010s it was quite clear that, under Putin, Russia

had turned its back on a more optimistic vision of post-Cold War relations with the West, no longer considering itself bound by its international undertakings. Even so, Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a shocking development. High-intensity state-on-state warfare, with all its appalling human costs and destabilising consequences, has returned to Europe, and what remained of a fragile settlement on European security has been shattered.

2.2.2 Russia believes that Moscow is entitled to re-establish a sphere of influence and that this justifies the subjection of Ukraine and the thwarting of its democratically determined aspirations to move closer to the EU and NATO. Above all, however, they fear 'contagion' from a prosperous, democratic and Western-facing Ukraine leading to domestic discontent.

2.2.3 While Putin disingenuously justifies the war in Ukraine with claims that NATO broke promises on enlargement and may believe his own groundless claims about external threats to Russia, responsibility lies squarely with him and his regime for their illegal actions. The invasion is a war of aggression against a neighbouring state whose sovereignty and legitimacy had been recognised by Russia (and guaranteed by the US, UK and Russia itself) after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the conduct of his invasion, Putin's regime and armed forces face credible charges of widespread war crimes.

2.2.4 Beyond Ukraine, Russia seeks to weaken and break the NATO alliance by undermining transatlantic and intra-European solidarity. It does so via threats of military force and so-called "hybrid" or "grey zone" warfare, which include attacks in cyberspace and on commercial and civilian infrastructure, interference in domestic politics and the propagation of disinformation. While the capabilities of its army have been significantly degraded by its war on Ukraine, Russia has hugely increased its defence

industrial capacity. It retains considerable air and missile capabilities, and although it has paid a high price in lost life and resources, it now has valuable experience of warfighting in the era of mass-produced drones and other forms of automation. Russia also has deeper and wider short-range and intermediate nuclear capabilities than NATO, and indeed far greater nuclear capability than France and the UK alone.

2.2.5 However, Putin and his military commanders significantly underestimated the difficulty of occupying and subjugating Ukraine. And thanks to the continued bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people, Russian forces have become bogged down and Russia is forced to deal with sabotage and attacks on its own territory. Yet any settlement in Ukraine would free up Russian military capacity and potentially could increase the level of threat to NATO territory, particularly in the Baltic states. With Putin's increased appetite for risk, and a potential window of opportunity while NATO reconstitutes its defences and finds ways to work with and around an erratic and unpredictable US President, a dangerous miscalculation is possible. A stepping up of activity in the "grey zone" of hybrid warfare could spread to localised or even full-scale military confrontation. Assessments vary, but some credible sources see a serious risk of direct conflict between Russia and NATO in the next five to ten years, possibly sooner.

2.2.6 In his aim to weaken Western liberal democracies, Putin is not isolated. Russia has gained vital support from China in sustaining its illegal war in Ukraine and in the mitigation of the effects of sanctions (China has also invested considerable effort in establishing a European foothold, for example through infrastructure development in the Western Balkans). Iran and North Korea have also provided equipment, and the latter has provided significant numbers of personnel for the prosecution of the war.

2.2.7 On the other hand, Putin's actions have also led to significant geostrategic setbacks. Having long claimed that Russia was encircled and threatened by NATO, his belligerence has led to previously neutral Sweden and Finland acceding to NATO and a step change in Alliance planning and commitment to further capability development. Moscow was angered by NATO enlargement to include Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia and has worked actively to undermine public support for the Alliance and the EU and prevent any further enlargement in South-East Europe. With sufficient investment, preparedness and solidarity, Europeans need not fear Putin's Russia.

2.3 Trump's America – an unreliable ally demanding more of Europeans

2.3.1 Since the founding of NATO in 1949, successive US administrations have declared their commitment to European security, epitomised by NATO's Article V mutual defence clause. While there have often been tensions within NATO over fair burden-sharing and accusations of European "free-riding", confidence in the durability of the alliance has long been underpinned by a belief that all allies share vital interests and core values. President Trump has upended those longstanding assumptions. As to defining what Article V entails in practice, and whether Europeans can expect US support to continue at all, Trump is rhetorically ambiguous at best. This ambiguity can also be found in official US policy. The 2025 US National Security Strategy (NSS) failed to identify Russia explicitly as a threat to NATO or the US, placing more emphasis on its notion of the threat of "civilisational erasure" in Europe. Perhaps most disturbing of all, however, are Trump's direct threats to acquire Greenland from Denmark, a NATO ally (even without a categorical commitment to rule out the use of force), and his stated designs on Canada.

2.3.2 Despite Trump's ambiguous and often confrontational statements, however, his administration continues to recognise US commitments to NATO. The 2026 US National Defense Strategy, for example, was more explicit than the NSS about the Russian threat, and committed the US to "playing a vital role" in NATO. There also remains a significant American military presence in Europe, with around 70,000 service personnel permanently deployed, and the US relies on the consent of European allies to operate several bases of significant strategic importance to its national security policy.

2.3.3 Perhaps more fundamentally, US membership of NATO still has strong support in Congress and among the American people, and Trump does not have the authority to formally withdraw the US from NATO, as this power lies solely with Congress. However, as Commander in Chief he has considerable discretion over the posture and operations of American forces. Indeed, in May he announced the withdrawal of 5,000 troops from Germany in response to criticism from Chancellor Merz over the US military action against Iran. This took place against a backdrop of wider threats to "punish" other European states for their refusal to back Operation Epic Fury.

2.4 China – a complex security challenge

2.4.1 China has seen phenomenal economic growth in the past forty years; since the turn of the century, it has surged from the world's 6th largest economy in nominal GDP terms to become second only to the US, and on GDP measured by purchasing power parity, it is now the largest. Under Xi Jinping, China has pursued its interests more aggressively, seeking to escape the "middle income trap" and become a technological superpower to rival the US.

2.4.2 In a remarkably short period of time, China has come to be regarded as a military “peer rival” to the US in the Indo-Pacific. It continues to apply economic and military pressure on Taiwan. Beyond the region, it is seeking to consolidate its dominant position in critical minerals using the dependence of others as political leverage, and is aiming to surpass the US as the most powerful global player, primarily through its dominance of emerging technologies.

2.4.3 Beijing increasingly views multilateral organisations as a means of enhancing its own influence. Xi has significantly expanded his country's international ambitions whilst seeking to exert tight controls over his immediate neighbourhood. As a permanent member of the Security Council, China remains committed to the UN, though it would prefer to shape it to align more closely with its own outlook and priorities. At the same time, Beijing has invested in the development of organisations and groups that diffuse the focus of multilateral cooperation from traditional Western centres to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the BRICS and the Asian Infrastructure Bank. China will continue to seek to reshape global governance to align it more closely with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interests and values. It has also invested massively in expanding its global influence, notably in the Global South.

2.4.4 China poses perhaps the most complex challenge for UK national security policy. The relationship is important in many ways, not least in terms of the attitudes of UK allies towards China and the global economic impact of its policies. The UK will need to work closely with its allies and like-minded partners and will need to balance containment of threats from China with engagement in areas of common concern, particularly climate change and the regulation of new technologies.

3 Strengthening and reshaping UK defence

3.0.1 Last year, the Labour Government set out its plans for UK defence policy and the future shape of our armed forces in the *Strategic Defence Review: Making Britain Safer* (SDR). Liberal Democrats welcomed the SDR and, in principle, there is much we support in its analysis and recommendations. It makes a compelling case for the nature of the threats we face from adversaries and how the UK should best configure its armed forces in the light of these threats. It also identifies rapid technological advances, not least those seen in action on the battlefield in Ukraine, which will be critical to the effectiveness of future military capabilities.

3.0.2 Liberal Democrats therefore support the SDR's key conclusions. In particular, we agree that defence spending needs to rise and that, so far as is possible, it should be configured to drive economic growth and technological innovation and help address regional economic disparities.

3.0.3 Liberal Democrats agree with the fundamental assumption that UK defence policy should be "NATO first" in the prioritising of commitments and the shaping of capabilities and the posture of our armed forces. While we support continued British participation in defence exercises outside the NATO area to support our wider interests, such as naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific region, given the threat posed by Russia to European security and our constrained military capabilities following years of Conservative cuts to our armed forces, we believe the UK must be clear about focussing its resources primarily on the Euro-Atlantic Area.

3.0.4 Liberal Democrats agree that the UK should maintain its submarine-launched continuous-at-sea nuclear deterrent. We believe that our nuclear deterrent must be used only for defensive purposes, and only to deter and defend against very large-scale and existential threats. The UK

should continue to assign our nuclear weapons to NATO, where an attack on one nation within the Alliance is regarded as an attack on all. We support the ultimate goal, enshrined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and official UK Government policy, of a world free from nuclear weapons.

3.0.5 Liberal Democrats recognise that the threat from our adversaries is not simply military. Moscow has discovered it can destabilise the West through an array of insidious “grey-zone” activities; examples include bribing politicians such as Reform UK’s former leader in Wales, Nathan Gill, and military actions too small to warrant a full Article V response from NATO. Such measures are designed to weaken the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, erode cohesion within and between nations, and undermine deterrence.

3.0.6 Liberal Democrats recognise the seriousness of these threats, and their potential to cause harms much greater than their direct impact. To respond, we believe the UK must honour not just the letter of Article V, but also the spirit. We would therefore encourage allies to join us in a measured response to hybrid and small-scale activities which seek to weaken any NATO nation or the alliance itself. Through this approach, we would work to restore the full deterrence against all Moscow’s malign activities, great and small.

3.0.7 In the light of lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war, and wider advances in technology, particularly in the field of AI, Liberal Democrats agree that our armed forces must be equipped and trained to deal with the challenges of a rapidly evolving defence and security environment.

3.0.8 Liberal Democrats also welcome the Government’s commitment to better pay and accommodation for our armed services personnel. Liberal Democrats remain hugely grateful for the dedication and sacrifice that our servicemen and women make for their country.

3.0.9 Liberal Democrats support the development of a “whole-of-society” approach to defence and national security. We also agree that the UK’s allies are vital to our national security and that cooperation must be deepened on a more structured and systematic basis. However, we are concerned that the Labour Government is not moving quickly enough on SDR recommendations in these areas.

3.0.10 It is also a matter of regret for Liberal Democrats that while many key assumptions around national security were once largely a matter of consensus in British politics, yet the Green Party has advocated for the UK’s withdrawal from NATO - a move which would critically undermine the UK’s security, and detach Britain from the most successful military alliance in history. Meanwhile, Reform UK’s Leader Nigel Farage has sought to blame NATO for Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, saying that the alliance’s eastward enlargement provoked Russia’s invasion. And, with their antagonistic attitude to the EU, neither the Conservatives nor Reform UK can build the necessarily deep and trusting UK-EU defence and security relationship that is now required.

3.0.11 Where we agree, Liberal Democrats will support the Government, but we will also hold it to account where it is failing to achieve them. We have identified three areas of concern in relation to the SDR. The first relates to efficient resourcing of the strategy; the second to its assumptions about the reliability and depth of future US commitment; and the third to urgency around implementation of its conclusions, particularly on deepening cooperation with allies and national resilience. Each point is addressed in more detail below.

3.1 More urgent and more efficient funding for UK defence and security

3.1.1 The UK and our European allies are emerging from a long period in which we have taken a significant “peace dividend” from post-Cold War defence spending cuts, leading to real-terms flat budgets and a declining share of GDP dedicated to defence. The combination of the Russian threat and concerns over the reliability and extent of support from the US means there are now significant shortfalls in both the quantity and quality of European capabilities. Progress on increasing spending and investing in capabilities is patchy across European NATO countries. Some, particularly in the North and East of Europe, already meet or exceed NATO targets while others are further behind.

3.1.2 The Conservatives left Britain weaker in a more dangerous world, and the effects of their long-term mismanagement are reflected in the state of the UK’s armed forces; the poor readiness of the Royal Navy was all too apparent during the recent crisis in the Gulf. Over the past decade, the UK Regular Forces fell by 11.6 per cent, while the trained strength of the Regular Forces fell by 13.3 per cent. Across the services, the British armed forces need to be reconstituted and reformed in line with the recommendations of the SDR. This, however, requires a significant uplift in defence spending.

3.1.3 Liberal Democrats therefore support the NATO spending target of 3.5 per cent of GDP on core defence requirements and a further 1.5 per cent on “defence and security related spending” by 2035, reaching 3 per cent by 2030. While it is not possible to set out detailed spending plans in this policy paper, we recognise that the new NATO spending target is demanding and will likely require difficult fiscal choices.

3.1.4 While we support the February 2025 uplift in defence spending to 2.5 per cent by 2027, the June 2026 Defence Investment Plan (DIP) failed to deliver the uplift in military spending needed to meet both existing commitments and the priorities outlined in last year's Strategic Defence Review. It provided £15 billion - just over half of the £28 billion detailed by military chiefs as necessary. It is also not clear where almost a third of that funding will be delivered from, with former Prime Minister Keir Starmer leaving his successor, Andy Burnham, to fill that gap at the Autumn Budget. Properly funded equipment and investment in new technologies are vital to meet the vision for the future of our armed forces set out in the SDR.

3.1.5 Liberal Democrats have therefore proposed that the Treasury raise £20bn in "defence bonds" to support an immediate injection of funds for acquisition of capital-intensive assets in the SDR. This will help to regenerate our armed forces following years of Conservative mismanagement. It will also give the British public an opportunity to choose to contribute more to the nation's security. With this injection of finance to accelerate capability development and invest in R&D, Liberal Democrats would also seek to generate national economic growth and regional expansion in jobs and skills.

3.1.6 Liberal Democrats also believe that we should work with our international partners to establish innovative and joint solutions for financing defence spending more cheaply. In particular, the UK should seek to join the EU's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) programme and advance proposals for a European Rearmament Bank, while also engaging with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney on his proposal for a Defence, Security and Resilience Bank (DSRB).

3.1.7 NATO's GDP targets provide a target floor for defence spending and promote fair burden-sharing within the alliance. The most important

objective for European NATO allies, however, is to have the right scale and quality of capabilities in place and the readiness to defend and deter against Russian aggression. Yet resources dedicated to defence may be poorly allocated, wasted through poor acquisition processes and opportunities for greater efficiency may be missed.

3.1.8 Liberal Democrats therefore believe that while spending targets are important, merely reaching or approaching them should not lead to an assumption that resources are necessarily being wisely spent. Greater scrutiny and MoD reform are also necessary to ensure effective and efficient spending, beneficial investment in the wider UK economy, the development of new technologies and maximisation of opportunities to gain efficiencies from deeper cooperation with allies. These points are developed in greater depth below.

3.2 Reforming defence equipment acquisition and scrutiny of government

3.2.1 The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has a poor record of delivery on its major equipment programmes. In December 2025, the National Audit Office (NAO) noted that of 42 eligible major projects, 12 were rated as “Red” (“Successful delivery appears unachievable”), 27 as “Amber” (“Successful delivery appears feasible but significant issues already exist”) and only three as “Green” (“Successful, no outstanding issues”). The MoD continues to suffer from high-profile and costly acquisition failures. Over £4bn of taxpayers’ money was wasted on the Nimrod maritime patrol and attack aircraft before it was scrapped in 2010. More recently, serious doubts have emerged over the viability of the Ajax armoured fighting vehicle (AFV), which has been delivered to the Army suffering from considerable problems, and which has consumed another £4bn of public funds.

3.2.2 Defence capability development in the UK and many Western countries has been too slow and bureaucratic and needs to become more agile. Ukraine offers lessons in how an innovative and effective defence sector can emerge at pace and then continue to evolve fast. UK and European defence industries need to produce not just an arsenal of weapons for a short war but be ready to adapt quickly if a war is protracted over months and years. Problems are not limited to major projects. UK SMEs have also expressed serious concerns over the MoD's ability to integrate them swiftly into its acquisition practices. Given the critical role ascribed to new technologies in the SDR, this must be addressed urgently. Liberal Democrats therefore regret the delay and dithering over the content and release of the DIP, which caused unnecessary and unhelpful uncertainty for UK industry and created friction with our allies over joint programmes.

3.2.3 To some extent, the acquisition of complex, cutting-edge equipment will always be vulnerable to cost increases, delays and wider inflation in the economy. Successive governments in the UK and elsewhere have attempted to tackle these problems without great success. Liberal Democrats support the Government's latest attempts at defence reform, but we are concerned they may not address fundamental problems as there have been repeated failures within the defence realm on procurement and operational matters. Not all of these can be blamed on ministerial decision-making. Lessons from the Chilcot Report of 2016 are still salient.

3.2.4 The Government needs to create new mechanisms to provide clear benchmarks to evaluate progress and improve scrutiny. Liberal Democrats therefore support the establishment of a new House of Commons Defence Public Accounts Committee for better scrutiny of the MoD's major projects.

This work should be supported by a detailed annual report submitted by the MoD on its progress towards achieving the aims of the DIP.

3.2.5 Beyond greater parliamentary scrutiny, Liberal Democrats believe that Defence requires an established, independent review function, similar to the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI), which oversees international development aid. We would seek to create a new body drawing on best practice in other NATO countries to act as an Inspector General for Defence. We also believe that there should be an independent inquiry to learn the lessons of the most disastrous acquisition failures of recent years.

3.3 Transitioning to greater European responsibility for security

3.3.1 Liberal Democrats are concerned that the SDR takes too much of a “business as usual” approach to the role of the US in European security, seemingly at odds with the actions of the Trump administration, and indeed its explicit emphasis on European NATO partners taking more responsibility for their own defence. This has been underlined by recent reports suggesting significant withdrawals of vital American capabilities from Europe, including fighter jets and critical enablers such as air tankers.

3.3.2 While Liberal Democrats want the US to remain engaged and committed to European security, we believe that further “Europeanisation” of the NATO alliance is essential. This will have significant ramifications for the European defence industrial base and military cooperation. The opportunities to do more with our allies will be explored in the following section. However, doubts over the reliability of the US also raise important questions for UK national autonomy in the generation and use of its military capabilities.

3.3.3 Liberal Democrats believe that in the near to medium-term the UK and its European allies will continue to rely heavily on the US for the supply of key capabilities and for critical enablers for operations. However, it is vital that the UK and our European allies plan now for the transition to a more resilient, efficient, productive and autonomous European defence industrial base.

3.3.4 In this context, Liberal Democrats are concerned about the autonomy of the UK's nuclear deterrent. The current arrangements related to the submarine-launched Trident system risk making the UK nuclear deterrent insufficiently independent. In the current environment, the country could face the possibility of unacceptable pressure from the President of the United States. At present, each Vanguard submarine can remain at sea and ready to launch Trident missiles for several months, and the British Prime Minister retains the sole right to order a nuclear strike. But if the White House were to cease supplies and technical support, the UK deterrent may cease to be viable. In the long-term, the UK should therefore aim for greater independence in its nuclear deterrent; we would consider options to maintain effective nuclear deterrence by the most affordable means.

3.3.5 Without the US, or with a much-reduced US contribution, Europeans also lack vital capabilities such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), air tankers, air mobility, suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD), rockets, integrated air and missile defence (IAMD) and long-range land-attack missiles. In this context, Liberal Democrats believe that the Government needs to provide a new assessment of those capabilities which should be as "sovereign" as possible, those that can be developed, and perhaps operated, with close allies in Europe and elsewhere, and those that can be acquired "off the shelf" from elsewhere

including the US. Options for deeper cooperation with allies will be considered in the next section.

4 Defending Freedom Together: Deeper Cooperation with Allies

4.0.1 The UK's national security is closely bound up with the security of our allies and partners in Europe and beyond, including those with whom we work particularly closely in NATO, and our 'Five Eyes' partners (Canada, Australia, New Zealand as well as the US). Beyond this, we are part of a wider community of states that share our commitment to liberal democracy and an international order based on principles of respect for sovereignty and fundamental freedoms. Supporting our friends and allies against external threats and attempts to undermine their democratic foundations is not only a matter of principle but strengthens our own security. This is particularly true in Ukraine.

4.1 Maintaining and strengthening support for Ukraine

4.1.1 From our time in the Coalition Government in 2014, and since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Liberal Democrats have unequivocally backed financial, military and civilian assistance to Ukraine. We stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people and admire their incredible resilience in the face of Russia's war of aggression. We believe it to be in the vital interest of the UK and our European allies that Ukraine continues to stand firm, with our support, against Russian aggression until it believes a just peace has been won or negotiated. As President Zelensky has said, "If Ukraine fails, Europe will be next".

4.1.2 Liberal Democrats support Franco-British proposals for a "Coalition of the Willing" to deploy forces to Ukraine should an acceptable peace deal emerge. For the foreseeable future, however, the priority is to meet

Ukraine's dire and urgent need of greater financial support for its military and civilian requirements. To that end, we strongly support the Government's negotiations to participate in the EU's €90bn loan to Ukraine.

4.1.3 Liberal Democrats will continue to call for the seizure and transfer to Ukraine of an estimated £30bn of UK-based Russian assets, and for a ban on the provision of all UK maritime services for Russian fossil fuel exports, including oil, oil products, gas and coal. These measures would provide a vital lifeline of support for Ukraine, reduce the Kremlin's revenue streams, and further strengthen Europe's frontline against Russian aggression.

4.2 Building and operating European military capabilities

4.2.1 In their aim of building up the necessary military capabilities to deter Russia, the UK and its European allies face a complex challenge, which is simultaneously political, economic and technological in nature. Some of the most crucial military capabilities are very expensive and tend towards high unit-cost inflation, reflecting the inherent risks in successfully developing and harnessing cutting-edge technology, including new applications for AI. Today, it is economically and politically implausible for any European state, even the largest, to field a "full spectrum" of military capabilities comparable to that which the US commands.

4.2.2 The unreliability of the US under President Trump has exposed the huge dependence of Europeans on US capabilities, both in terms of acquisition and operations. Even assuming continued, but much-reduced US support, Europeans will face an unprecedented challenge given their reliance on the US for many "critical enablers". In future, they will need to acquire and operate such capabilities themselves.

4.2.3 The imperative must therefore be to pursue deeper cooperation throughout the entire cycle of development, production and deployment of capabilities. Given the expense involved in acquiring the most expensive capabilities, however, this will require more joint acquisition of equipment, as well as sharing of ISR data in order to operate together effectively. With the shift in warfighting towards Multi-Domain Operations and the concept of an “integrated targeting web” envisaged by the SDR, deep cooperation among NATO allies is a technological as well as a political and economic imperative.

4.2.4 Liberal Democrats believe that a single “European Army” is politically and militarily implausible. Yet so too is full national autonomy in the acquisition and operation of military capabilities; the UK’s national security is too enmeshed with that of our allies. This interdependence does not mean we should give up national decision-making over sending troops to war or the control of the nuclear deterrent. It does mean, however, that European NATO allies should be willing to accept further mutual dependencies in the generation and use of their military capabilities.

4.2.5 Liberal Democrats believe that the UK must take the lead in pushing for collective European military capabilities that would support both NATO and intra-European “coalitions of the willing”. Cooperative initiatives such as the NATO-owned and operated Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) and Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) provide tried and tested models for collective acquisition, ownership and deployment of the most expensive assets. Other initiatives on a bilateral or mini-lateral basis may also provide an effective and efficient means by which to meet capability targets.

4.3 A vanguard grouping for European capability development

4.3.1 NATO and the EU are crucial and complementary institutions which underpin European security. NATO is vital to planning and to operations, and Liberal Democrats believe it must remain the cornerstone of collective territorial defence in Europe and the wider Euro-Atlantic area. While we want to see the US continue to be an engaged and committed partner in NATO, we believe that Europeans must take on more responsibility within the alliance. Liberal Democrats also recognise that the EU has an increasingly important role to play in support for industrial policy, capability development and resilience, and that the UK can no longer be a bystander in EU defence cooperation.

4.3.2 However, the huge strategic challenge of coordinating effective and efficient capability development is not yet being effectively addressed by either organisation, alone or in combination. The recent collapse of the Franco-German Future Combat Aircraft System (FCAS) means that Europeans will now take an even more fragmented approach to their crucial future fighter jet programmes, a key plank of investment and innovation in the European defence industrial and technological base. While there have been and continue to be successes in European defence cooperation, the breakdown of FCAS is a talismanic failure of strategic coordination.

4.3.3 NATO and the EU provide a legitimate, multilateral basis for European security, but their decision-making and leadership can suffer from the sheer number of partners and blocking by political outliers. There is a need for a smaller and more agile grouping of states to provide a vanguard for European security leadership. Until its disbandment in 2011, the Western European Union (WEU) provided a non-NATO,

“Europeans-only” forum for questions of European security, particularly in the field of capability development. While it was then deemed redundant, with the advent of Brexit and the Trump presidency, such a forum is now conspicuous by its absence.

4.3.4 To some degree, informal groupings such as the E3 (which includes the UK, France and Germany) and the E5 Defence Ministers (which includes the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Poland) have provided leadership. In particular, the E3 format has evolved into a core grouping for European diplomacy and security in an era of uncertainty over the reliability of the US. Liberal Democrats strongly support the work of the E3 and believe it should continue on a largely informal basis; with their combined economic and political weight, the E3 countries can provide direction and reassurance to Europeans in a crisis. Yet the grouping is arguably too small to provide leadership in critical areas of strategic cooperation, for example, in terms of promoting and providing direction to a vision of European military capabilities in the absence of the US.

4.3.5 Liberal Democrats therefore believe there is a need for a formalised “mini-lateral” grouping of European states which can provide strategic direction for the development of European capacity and capabilities to deter Russia and other actors from aggression and interference. In this context, we support the creation of a European Security Council (ESC), which would meet at heads of state and government level, and in relevant ministerial formats.

4.3.6 The ESC would have a remit for systematic sharing of information and developing action in the following fields: capability acquisition to cover gaps left by the US, ensuring an appropriate degree of European autonomy, coordination of defence industrial cooperation and rationalisation, a forum to oversee and initiate common European

initiatives to share debt for the joint acquisition and potentially operation of capabilities, an “observatory” function to ensure a complete picture of European defence cooperation projects (multilateral, bilateral and minilateral), strategic coordination of economic and security policies in the face of complex hybrid threats emanating from hostile powers, and finally a forum for leadership in any other pressing areas of foreign and economic policy of direct relevance to European security.

4.3.7 Its core membership would be made up of the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Ukraine and an EU representative. As a minilateral grouping, it would need to be sensitive to concerns from other European allies. As such, where relevant it would sit in different formations with participation from other European allies, for example, with Scandinavian and Baltic allies and NATO representatives. It might also establish a link and work in coordination with the European Political Community (EPC) to sit at the heart of a comprehensive multilateral European security grouping. Within its remit, the ESC would also need to work particularly closely with the EU’s European Defence Agency (EDA) and the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR), which have successfully overseen complex and high-profile European defence projects.

4.4 Bilateral and small group European military cooperation

4.4.1 Concrete defence cooperation projects, both industrial and operational, often take place outside NATO and the EU, even where those institutions may provide seed funding or a broad framework for the collaboration. Due to shared geographical interests, pre-existing relationships or shared capability requirements, states usually find it easier to cooperate at the bilateral level or in small groupings. While such forms of cooperation constitute something of a patchwork of initiatives, they will

continue to make up a significant portion of European capability development for the foreseeable future.

4.4.2 In recent years, the UK has pursued high-profile bilateral defence cooperation arrangements, notably with France and Germany through the Lancaster House and Trinity House treaties respectively. It has also been instrumental in setting up the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which is made up of Northern European NATO Member States, but which can act independently of the alliance when necessary. While European allies make most sense for such cooperative programmes, the UK has also entered collaborative arrangements with partners around the world such as the AUKUS nuclear submarine programme with the US and Australia, and the Global Combat Air Programme with Italy and Japan.

4.4.3 Liberal Democrats believe the cultivation of bilateral and small group defence cooperative initiatives is vital to UK defence policy. However, it is important to ensure that there is capacity to resource them within the government and to retain coherence across many different industrial and operational initiatives. The proposed ESC could help in this regard.

4.5 Energising the UK-EU security and defence partnership

4.5.1 It is widely accepted that Brexit has inflicted tremendous damage on the UK economy, but it has also had deeply regrettable consequences for European defence and security cooperation, creating a problematic rift between the UK and its European allies. Those barriers to cooperation have grown in significance since Brexit as the EU has become a more significant player in the field of defence and security, particularly as regards military capability development. With initiatives such as the European Peace Facility (EPF), European Defence Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation

(PESCO), low-interest loans through the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) and the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), the EU has established an increasingly important role in funding and coordinating defence industrial research and production.

4.5.2 From modest beginnings, funding for defence industrial cooperation among its Member States has grown to around €1.6bn, and following negotiation of the next EU Multi-Annual Financial Framework, could reach €10bn per year. Yet because the UK is regarded as a “third country”, there are significant barriers to UK participation in EU initiatives, and restrictions around intellectual property sharing and design authority.

4.5.3 Liberal Democrats welcomed the signing of the UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) in 2025 in which both sides agreed that the UK can and should take part in EU initiatives where agreement on terms can be reached. Unfortunately, it has so far failed to live up to its billing as a platform for deeper UK-EU defence cooperation. Indeed, the first attempt at cooperation in the field of military capability, which would have given the UK’s defence industry greater access to sell its products to EU Member States through the SAFE programme, broke down over disagreements on UK financial contributions, highlighting a structural flaw in EU-UK defence and security relations.

4.5.4 Liberal Democrats deeply regret this outcome. It cannot be right that at a time of such grave threat to European security, close allies are reduced to disputes over funding, thereby frustrating the development of a thriving European defence and technological base, an outcome which all allies believe is necessary for greater security and autonomy in future. As noted above, we welcome the Government’s aim to negotiate participation in the EU’s €90bn loan to Ukraine.

4.5.5 With the EU looking to use its budget to invest more deeply in the European defence industrial base and continuing to promote the development of a “single market” approach to the sector, there is a serious risk that UK-based defence companies, some of the most significant of which are European-owned, will be increasingly attracted to the EU for seed-funding and critical mass of investment. Yet European allies will also pay a price if their technological and industrial base excludes the capacity and cutting-edge technological expertise of the UK.

4.5.6 In line with Liberal Democrat policy on the EU set out in policy motion *Rebuilding Trade and Cooperation with Europe*, Liberal Democrats believe these frictions can be eliminated by closer UK association with the EU, via joining a Customs Union, the Single Market, and eventually through a return to full membership of the EU.

4.5.7 As participants in the Single Market, European Economic Area (EEA) countries secure easier access to the key EU defence capability development initiatives. With such a status, the UK would have far greater access and a level of influence much closer to that of a full EU Member State. The EU’s plans for a competitiveness fund which will encompass the defence industry among other sectors could represent a significant opportunity to negotiate such an arrangement.

4.5.8 Beyond the field of military capability development, the SDP offers many opportunities for deeper UK-EU cooperation. Liberal Democrats welcome the new spirit of dialogue between the UK and the EU in important fields such as cyber security and counterterrorism. Despite its warm words, however, the Labour Government has not yet injected sufficient urgency or ambition into the operational side of the relationship. Liberal Democrats are concerned that the Government is putting fear of

anti-EU populist nationalism over opportunities to deepen military cooperation with our European allies.

4.5.9 For example, the UK has the possibility to join EU military missions such as Operation Althea (EUFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which already has force contributions from non-EU countries, notably Turkey, and Operation Atalanta, the anti-piracy naval mission off the Horn of Africa. Liberal Democrats believe the UK should join such missions where the UK has an interest in doing so and capabilities to offer. It is difficult to see why the Royal Navy should not, for example, contribute to Operation Atalanta in future. Liberal Democrats therefore believe that the UK should move quickly to sign a Framework Participation Agreement to ensure the ability to participate in such missions when opportunities arise.

4.5.10 Likewise, the EDA is an increasingly important player in Brussels and its responsibilities for managing EU projects are growing. The Government should also sign a Framework Agreement on association with the EDA; this would provide a valuable means by which the UK could improve its understanding of EU policy in the field of defence capability development. It is difficult to see why such cooperative arrangements have not yet been put in place.

4.5.11 The referendum on EU membership was a decade ago and marked the point when normal engagement with the EU ceased. Our formal departure was more than six years ago. British officials with expertise of its institutions and practices have moved on, and there is a growing EU knowledge deficit in Whitehall. Liberal Democrats therefore call on the Government to negotiate wide-ranging diplomatic and military exchange programmes to ensure that the UK has a cadre of officials across government who have a good depth of understanding of EU defence and security cooperation.

5 A More Resilient United Kingdom

5.0.1 The end of the Cold War ushered in a period during which the UK and other NATO allies steadily reduced their defences. This had a visible impact on defence spending and levels of readiness, accompanied in the UK by a significant reduction in both personnel and assets. There was a parallel impact on this country's resilience as a nation and our preparedness as a society to withstand the rigours of conflict, including the challenges of new forms of hybrid and "grey zone" warfare.

5.0.2 The Labour Government has sought to address this. The 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) made recommendations on enhancing resilience, and the National Resilience Action Plan (NRAP) appeared at about the same time. The SDR and NRAP go in the right direction, but implementation has been sluggish and embryonic. There is a crucial need for greater urgency.

5.0.3 Enhancing UK resilience in the face of all kinds of emergencies, stemming from military conflict, hybrid warfare or other crises, is a national priority. Liberal Democrats, committed to robust defence based on strong alliances and with the party's broad representation at local level across the UK, are well placed to lead on this agenda.

5.1 Changing threats

5.1.1 The National Preparedness Commission has described a range of threats requiring enhanced UK resilience. Some of these emanate from potential military conflict, some from conflicts elsewhere or from hybrid/grey zone activity directly or indirectly impacting the United Kingdom. Other threats which feature on the National Risk Register include pandemic disease, flooding, power failure, cyber and terrorist attacks.

Some of these could flow from or be exacerbated by UK involvement in conflict.

5.1.2 In recent years we have been buffeted by phenomena making the threats we face even more acute. These include the advance of climate change, increased migration flows, competition for scarce natural resources, the changing world order, technological advances and the proliferation of armed conflict, including in Europe and the Middle East.

5.1.3 Covert attacks on energy, digital and other infrastructure in several European countries have raised awareness that the nature of the threats is changing rapidly. While the UK is not at war, we are already vulnerable to potentially devastating hostile activity on an unprecedented scale, mostly undertaken against us by state actors, including Russia, China and Iran, but also by non-state actors. The UK public is becoming increasingly aware of the vulnerability of the critical infrastructure on which our modern-day economies and societies rely.

5.1.4 State actors are resorting more frequently to coercive measures and the use of force to maximise their influence and deliver their objectives. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 we have seen growing evidence of the Kremlin's activity beyond Russia's borders – including disruption of democratic elections, arson attacks, assassination, cutting of undersea cables, disinformation and cyber-attacks. This is a reminder of the willingness of Russia and other state actors to engage in hostile activity beyond their borders and without regard to international law or public safety.

5.1.5 The challenge of securing critical facilities and digital infrastructure against cyber-attack demonstrates the extent to which national security and national resilience have merged. Vulnerabilities are not limited to central government systems. Local government and extensive parts of the

private sector are also exposed, all the more so because of underinvestment in cyber capability and digital hygiene. Public and private sector entities in the UK are investing heavily in cyber defence, but the rapid growth of Chinese cyber-attack capabilities in particular means a huge increase in cyber defence resources and capability will be required.

5.1.6 The US/Iran standoff in the Gulf has highlighted the UK's vulnerability to economic shocks resulting from conflict elsewhere. Quite apart from the impact of fuel prices on inflation, the crisis has highlighted our continuing dependence on fossil fuel imports and the importance of developing alternative energy sources.

5.1.7 While the focus of this paper is international security and the threat of conflict, robust homeland security is essential to the country's ability to deter and protect. This requires the whole-of-society to be prepared for emergencies, whether sparked by conflict or other causes. As the SDR made clear, in time of war the nature of attacks on the UK will change and intensify, demanding nationwide endurance, for which the population is not currently prepared.

5.2 A lack of action and urgency

5.2.1 Taken as a package, the SDR and NRAP make important recommendations on enhancing national resilience. The SDR stressed the need for a whole-of-society approach to security and resilience, recommending that the government should lead a national conversation to raise public awareness of threats to the UK, operationalise the Strategic Reserve and build better understanding of the role of the Armed Forces and the NATO Alliance. The NRAP recommended the launch of a Home Defence Programme.

5.2.2 SDR implementation has been beset by delays. The same is true of NRAP. While events, including the blockade of crucial trade routes, have focused minds on specific impacts such as shortages of petroleum products, the Government has failed to launch a wider national conversation on resilience. Although the Resilience Academy is a good initiative, it is limited in scope, and its success requires both greater ambition and greater education for the wider public on defence and the importance of NATO. Efforts to develop a Home Defence Programme and refresh the Strategic Reserve are no more than embryonic.

5.2.3 Robust military and civilian reserves are a key element in ensuring national resilience. The 2021 Reserve Forces Review highlighted the growing threat posed by grey zone aggression and set out how the military reserves could contribute to defending the country more effectively against these threats. In parallel, the previous Government's "Integrated Review" announced the launch of a "civil reserve". Although the Territorial Army was rebranded as the Army Reserve, the Reserve Forces Review's recommendations on strengthening and operationalising the reserve have not been implemented. The civil reserve has not come into being.

5.2.4 This lack of urgency means not only that the UK is failing to meet its obligations to NATO Allies under Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty but also that it is more vulnerable to external shocks likely to have a direct impact on our prosperity and way of life.

5.3 Learning from our allies

5.3.1 The resilience picture across NATO Allies is quite mixed. However, some Allies, notably Scandinavian and Baltic countries, offer models with elements the UK should emulate.

5.3.2 Sweden's system of reserves includes an obligation for all citizens aged 16-70 who are not part of the armed forces to participate in non-military defence of the country. In 2025, responding to growing grey zone threats, the Government activated civil defence duty for 19 professions considered essential during crises – from rail repair specialists and firefighters to electricians and dentists. Sweden organises its civil reserve through its Civil Defence and Resilience Agency.

5.3.3 Norway deploys its Home Guard reservists as a civil contingency force to support local and national authorities in tackling emergencies. Examples in recent years have included the COVID pandemic and landslides near Oslo. Importantly, Norwegian reservists train regularly with local authorities, the police and the fire and rescue services. They participate in regular coordination meetings chaired by local municipal directors. Reservists' connection to local communities is regarded as crucial to their success.

5.3.4 In Denmark, the armed forces can call upon well-trained reservists at short notice. This was visible when some 200 reservists supported the response to a drone incursion at Danish airports in September 2025. In all Baltic and Scandinavian countries provision is made for military and civilian reservists, by arrangement with private and public sector employers, to participate in regular exercises based on emergency scenarios.

5.3.6 Achieving an acceptable level of national resilience clearly requires a massive step change and a new seriousness about whole-of-society action. Elements for a Liberal Democrat response should include:

5.4 National level interventions

5.4.1 Recognising that current structures are inadequate, Liberal Democrats would embrace a coherent approach to strengthening

resilience, led by the government and better resourced at local level. We pledge to establish a new Department of State, the Civil Defence Office, overseen by a Secretary of State.

5.4.2 The Secretary of State for Civil Defence will support the Prime Minister in leading the national conversation and coordinating national resilience, working in close partnership with devolved administrations and other government departments, especially the Cabinet Office, MoD, DESNZ, FCDO and the National Cyber Security Centre. The CDO will have overall responsibility for implementing the National Resilience Action Plan and will lead work on regular communication with all citizens on strengthening resilience, aiming to inform and educate in order to increase national preparedness, build greater public confidence and combat disinformation. The CDO will coordinate efforts to identify and tackle unacceptable outside interference in our democratic elections.

5.4.3 Within twelve months, the CDO will establish a new Civil Volunteer Reserve (CVR) based on Scandinavian civil reserve models. This will require new legislation, to be harmonised to the extent possible across the four nations. Core professions (such as electricians, medical personnel, logistics and transport experts) will be identified from which volunteers will be encouraged and incentivised to make themselves available for joint training and exercising. A national Civil Volunteer Register will be drawn up and maintained by the CDO.

5.4.4 Individual government departments will retain the lead for their respective contributions to the national resilience effort. For example, the MoD will maintain its lead responsibility for the country's military reserves. However, the MoD will implement a new national programme for strengthening and operationalising the Army Reserve and the Strategic Reserve. Work will proceed at pace to complete a comprehensive register

of members of both reserves, and to establish regular communication with all of them. Training and exercising of the Reserve forces will be conducted in close coordination with the CDO, devolved administrations and local authorities.

5.4.5 Just as Liberal Democrats have taken the lead on core domestic issues such as social care and the NHS, so we should launch a national conversation on defence and national resilience. Communities and families around the UK stand to benefit from a nationwide discussion addressing issues of widespread concern. The national conversation will be taken to schools and colleges across the UK, building on the new Resilience Academy and the embryonic Defence Education Network, and will be pursued in close partnership with the private sector.

5.4.6 As noted above, the UK is currently vulnerable to a wide range of potential shocks, whose intensity and probability are both increasing. Liberal Democrat policy on adaptation to the impacts of climate change was covered in Policy Paper 160, *For People, For Planet (2025)*. Our forthcoming paper on economic policy, scheduled for 2027, will include proposals on international trade and investment; supply chain resilience, including on energy sources, food, and critical minerals and other strategic products and resources; and AI and IT vulnerabilities

5.5 Local level interventions

5.5.1 We would launch the CVR and establish a regular pattern of training and exercising at local and national levels, which will require a new dynamic in co-ordination of the response to conflict-driven emergencies. Local authorities will need to be empowered and resourced to contribute substantively to the national effort. Local Resilience Committees (LRCs) will replace existing local resilience fora and assume a proactive role in ensuring a state of enhanced preparedness in respective local authorities

across the United Kingdom. LRCs will be chaired by elected mayors or their deputies and will organise local recruitment to the Civil Volunteer Reserve in coordination with the CDO. They will not only coordinate the local level response to threats, but organise training and exercising as well as more effective and regular communication with the public.

5.5.2 A Liberal Democrat government would introduce a new Civil Contingencies and Defence Act, which will give Local Resilience Committees the powers to assume these additional operational responsibilities. Seamless coordination between the CDO, local authorities and devolved administrations will be essential, as will additional resourcing for civil defence under a new national settlement for defence.

5.5.3 As laid out in Policy Paper 158, *Science, Innovation & Technology*, Liberal Democrats would enact a comprehensive strategy to ensure that the UK's digital infrastructure and vital digital technologies are secure. Local government, in particular, is not adequately funded for general digital protection. As a sector, it remains vulnerable. At the moment, very few full-time staff in local government work on emergency planning. Ignoring this threat leaves local community services – like GP surgeries, hospitals, police stations, schools, libraries, and magistrate courts – all vulnerable to digital attacks. As part of this, we would introduce a local government programme of enhancing cybersecurity. Much of this will be about behavioural and cultural changes in staff and councillors. We would introduce a free training programme for staff and newly-elected councillors, to achieve the culture shift that is needed as well as ensuring that funding is available for modernising software and hardware, as outlined previously.

5.6 International level interventions

5.6.1 The UK will make it a priority to meet and maintain its obligations on national resilience under Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The new CDO will lead on national resilience in the relevant NATO bodies.

5.6.2 As part of thickening UK-EU defence relations, the UK will advocate seamless cooperation between NATO and the EU on civil defence. The UK will seek readmission to the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

6 The UK and the International Order: Defending Multilateralism

6.1 Why multilateralism matters

6.1.1 As we strengthen our resilience, we need also to pay attention to the wider international environment that can enhance or weaken our safety and security as a nation. Liberalism and internationalism have long gone hand in hand - our Liberal predecessors were early champions of multilateralism. A commitment to multilateralism has been an essential tenet of modern liberal democracy and a fundamental pillar of post-war UK foreign policy. It should remain so.

6.1.2 At its best, multilateralism can solve collective and global problems - from arms proliferation and climate change, to threats from non-state actors. Multilateral organisations enable debate, rules-setting and compliance monitoring. They provide a platform for cooperation on global challenges, a framework for conflict prevention and resolution, and mechanisms to support stability through action to improve lives and reduce inequalities. Notwithstanding fair criticism for bureaucracy, cost and underachievement, multilateral organisations have made the post-Second World War world a safer, more stable place than it might otherwise have been.

6.1.3 In our increasingly disorderly and unpredictable world, the erosion of respect for an international order based around agreed laws and negotiated commitments, and the institutions that develop this, are among the most significant challenges to global stability. This erosion has grave implications for our national security, the security of our allies, our role in the world and the future of liberal democratic values.

6.2 An uncertain landscape

6.2.1 International developments are inherently less predictable than domestic ones given the range of variables. Trump's re-election and subsequent actions have heightened that unpredictability. The UK's policy approach needs to be flexible enough to adapt to a range of outcomes, from a return to a more familiar landscape after Trump's second presidency to a disorderly collapse that negates progress on global challenges and leads to widespread conflict.

6.2.2 Whilst policy needs to be adaptable, our goals and priorities should be clear: in these difficult and uncertain times, UK national security is best served by a robust international order and effective multilateral organisations. Liberal Democrats consider the disparagement of international law, opposition to stronger relationships with our European neighbours or a wish to leave NATO, as voiced by senior figures in other UK political parties, to be wholly irresponsible.

6.2.3 At the same time, we recognise the need for international frameworks to adapt and international law to be updated to remain relevant and effective in a dynamic world. New technologies, demographic change, the nature of the global economy and developing political relationships necessitate adaptation. Without effectively functioning multilateral fora and regimes to address serious emerging and developing challenges such as autonomous weapons, a space arms race, the spread of nuclear technology, geopolitical competition in the polar regions, or climate change, our world will be a much more dangerous place.

6.2.4 Liberal Democrats are committed to reducing nuclear threats around the world. We support the ultimate goal, enshrined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and official UK Government policy, of a world free from nuclear weapons. In government, we would redouble efforts for a

multilateral reduction in the stocks of nuclear weapons, with a particular drive to bring China and North Korea into diplomatic frameworks which place limits on nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. But, for as long as nuclear threats remain, and countries like Russia retain nuclear arsenals, we believe it is vital that the UK also retains a credible nuclear deterrent.

6.3 Rule makers as rule breakers

6.3.1 The present shifting and unpredictable geopolitical landscape presents unprecedented challenges to multilateralism and the international order.

6.3.2 Over past decades a small number of 'rogue' states habitually disregarded international rules and norms. But the twenty-first century has seen the rise of powerful autocratic leaders, with ambitions and influence far beyond their own borders and a reckless attitude to any principle or commitment that gets in their way, even if they have their own permanent seats at the top international table, the UN Security Council.

6.3.3 Putin's violations of Russia's international commitments over more than 20 years are well known: deployment of a radioactive isotope and a weapons-grade nerve agent in the UK, illegal annexation of Crimea and war against Ukraine to name just a few. Putin has long been believed to aspire to 'a new Yalta' where great powers would redefine the world order.

6.3.4 More recently, our closest security ally, the previously broadly multilateralist US, under Donald Trump, announced its withdrawal from 66 international bodies of varying significance, precipitated a UN funding crisis and launched military operations against Venezuela and Iran. Tellingly, Trump announced the creation of a 'Board of Peace' operating on his preferred terms.

6.3.5 Where once Beijing's focus in multilateral organisations had been preventing external encroachment upon its own domestic affairs, it has increasingly seen them as a means of enhancing its own influence. Xi has significantly expanded his country's international ambitions whilst seeking to exert tight controls over his immediate neighbourhood. As a permanent member of the Security Council, China remains committed to the UN, though would prefer to shape it to align more closely with its own outlook and priorities. At the same time, Beijing has invested in the development of organisations and groups that diffuse the focus of multilateral cooperation from traditional Western centres like New York and Geneva, for example the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the BRICS and the Asian Infrastructure Bank. We should expect continuing moves to reshape global governance to align more closely with Chinese communist interests and values.

6.3.6 Whilst economic development continues on a massive scale at breakneck speed, Xi has been building China up as a military as well as technological superpower. It has also invested massively in expanding its global influence, notably in the Global South. At the same time it has worked to consolidate its global dominance over critical minerals, including rare earths - and stepped up economic and military pressure on Taiwan. In short, under Xi, Beijing is aiming to surpass the US as the most powerful global player, primarily through its dominance of emerging technologies. In the meantime, we could be facing a de facto G2.

6.3.7 The rhetoric and actions of the major autocrats also embolden other authoritarian leaders and regional military powers to believe they can pursue their interests ruthlessly with impunity: at the time of writing the consequences of military action in the Middle East by Trump remain to be seen.

6.4 Transition, disruption, or rupture?

6.4.1 This resurgence of great power politics undermines the foundations of multilateralism. Against the backdrop of a massively different US foreign policy, Putin and Xi have found common cause in seeking to forge a *multipolar* world, where a small number of powerful states exercise significant control over spheres of influence, in place of a *multilateral* one where all states are assigned equal rights and responsibilities. This shared interest does not, however, mitigate the serious risks associated with strategic competition between Washington, Moscow and Beijing, for example in the Arctic.

6.4.2 Not all challenges facing the multilateral system are new. Long-standing complaints concern funding, geographical representation and the blocking powers of individual states. UN peace operations have faced growing challenges for some years and their future is in flux. The arms control picture has been deteriorating for two decades: the lapsing this February of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) means there is no legally binding limit on Russian and American strategic nuclear forces.

6.4.3 In some other major bodies, effectiveness is undermined by limited membership: the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court is not recognised by countries including the US, Russia, China, Iran, Israel, India or Pakistan. But it is the increasingly reckless actions of leaders at the top table that are pushing the system to its limits. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has referred to 'rupture'. Finnish President Alexander Stubb sees it as a 'transition'. Alternative descriptions might be 'disruption' or, optimistically, 'turning point'.

6.4.4 In fact, many parts of the multilateral system continue to function within established patterns. (A treaty to protect marine biodiversity in

international waters entered into force in January 2026.) And, behind the headlines, the US has proposed not UN dismantlement but a 'back to security basics' rationalisation. However, a return to the former status quo looks highly unlikely. Nor is there any immediate prospect of agreement on effective UN reform or significant new arms control.

6.5 A way through

6.5.1 In the short to medium term, whilst supporting efforts to improve the coherence and relevance of the UN system, Liberal Democrats believe that UK foreign policy should focus on:

- Defending global institutions and norms which are critical to our national security and prosperity.
- Maintaining and, where necessary, reinforcing our capacity to protect and further UK interests through multilateral organisations, ensuring that any reshaping of global governance respects principles of sovereign equality and fundamental freedoms.
- Building upon multilateral partnerships with European and other like-minded states to enhance our national security through strengthening digital autonomy (such as the EU Chips Joint Undertaking).
- Deepening economic and defence ties with our European partners.
- Diversifying our relationships and doubling down on cooperation with other liberal democracies who share our interests and values, notably our close allies Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

6.5.2 The UK's international standing and influence is closely linked to our multilateral profile as one of five permanent UN Security Council members, a member of the G7, a leading military power within NATO, and an active, expert contributor within security organisations like the IAEA and OPCW. Altogether the UK is a member of around 80 global or regional

multilateral bodies, many working for security and stability directly, or indirectly through regulation or mitigation of resource or potential migratory pressures.

6.5.3 We are also active in informal coalitions and diplomatic initiatives to address specific security challenges and in convening and contributing to specific task-focused groups and coalitions (for example, the Joint Expeditionary Force and Ukraine “Coalition of the Willing”). As described in the Government’s 2025 Strategic Defence Review, the UK has a wide range of partnerships around the world on the military front.

6.5.4 Within the larger organisations, cooperation with like-minded partners is also fundamental to our approach and helps ensure a strong values-based voice. Since Brexit, effective coordination with European partners in multilateral organisations should be seen as more important than ever to UK interests.

6.5.5 We hope that a future US administration will return to a positive leadership role in the multilateral system. But, as the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee wrote in their April 2026 report on rebalancing UK/US relations, “the UK cannot assume that the US will retain its position as steward of the global order. It must therefore work with like-minded partners to buttress a rules-based system on which its own security and prosperity depend.”

6.5.6 Whilst NATO must remain the central pillar of our national defence, our security also depends upon building a network of reliable, robust partnerships and systems that support greater self-sufficiency. This will require an increased focus on working with European neighbours, as set out in section four above.

6.6 Pillars of stability

6.6.1 We welcome Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's Davos appeal for middle powers to build a new, values-based world order. Canada, one of the UK's most reliably like-minded partners, is showing the way under Liberal leadership and we accept his challenge to cooperate for a brighter future. As long as the US attitude remains equivocal, the liberal vision of multilateralism needs to be upheld by middle power cooperation and combined influence, responsible use of economic or military power – and persuasive argument.

6.6.2 We agree with Prime Minister Carney that values including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as human rights must remain at the heart of middle power cooperation. We therefore recommend that Liberal Democrats engaged in Liberal International work closely with our counterparts in Canada and other trusted allies to consider whether the best middle power counterweight can be created through a formalised new 'middle-power' grouping of equal, like-minded states, for example the 'Democratic 7' (D7) proposed by Anders Fogh Rasmussen and comprising the EU, UK, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, or through flexible groups and ad hoc cooperation, with a wider range of states that may not all fully share our values.

6.6.3 Because of our long-standing relationships with the countries of the Commonwealth and others, and our responsibilities as a Permanent Member of the Security Council, the UK needs a broad overview of the world and a strong, expert diplomatic presence in a wide range of countries and multilateral bodies. But this global engagement cannot be at the expense of attention to our European neighbourhood as happened with the last Conservative Government's ill-conceived 'Indo-Pacific tilt'.

6.6.4 Liberal Democrats believe the UK should retain its commitment to the OSCE which among other things provides a forum for debate across political fault lines, including on Ukraine, and helps defuse and manage simmering regional tensions through its field operations. Whilst recognising the limitations of its consensus decision-making and lack of enforcement mechanisms, we should work to keep alive its Helsinki Final Act principles and be ready to reinvigorate the conventional arms control and Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) that helped deliver collective security in Europe at the end of the Cold War and could do so again.

6.6.5 Likewise, we should continue to demonstrate support for legal arbiters such as the ICJ and the ICC as vital pillars of the international rules-based order in the face of attacks on their legitimacy from certain states and populist politicians. Liberal Democrats will continue to argue the case for Britain's membership in the Council of Europe and for the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights as a guarantor of liberal values of fairness, justice and respect.

6.6.6 Though not the focus of this policy paper, we highlight the important role of international development assistance in supporting global stability, for example by reducing resource pressures and reducing inequalities. In this context we believe Labour should reverse its Official Development Assistance (ODA) cut, fund the uplift in defence spending to 2.5 per cent via an increase in the digital services tax to 10 per cent, and set out a roadmap for returning to 0.7 per cent of GNI. This might include increased delivery through multilateral channels where we have confidence in organisational capability and integrity and where UK involvement can shape effective delivery.

6.7 Protecting our interests

6.7.1 The UK's ability to defend our national interests, including in multilateral fora, depends upon our reputation, influence and diplomatic capability. We deplore the damage done by the last Conservative Government to this international standing and diplomatic capability in the course of Brexit and the merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with the Department for International Development, and the present Labour Government's inappropriate and ill-fated political appointment of Lord Mandelson as British Ambassador to Washington. For the sake of our national security and wider interests the UK must be represented by a Diplomatic Service that values foreign policy expertise and experience, prioritises the skills - including foreign languages - needed to build effective international relationships and to negotiate effectively, and is supported in Whitehall by a ministry fully equipped to tackle our most pressing foreign policy challenges.

6.7.2 In support of a healthy international order that can promote stability whilst generating confidence in the future, we should:

- Support ambitious UN reform, including expansion of permanent membership of the Security Council for wider geographical representation to support global stability and conflict prevention.
- Prioritise efforts to strengthen or develop international agreements on new technologies including autonomous weapons, and on risks relating to the use of space; inject greater urgency into multilateral efforts to deliver effective global governance relating to AI that protects the safety and security of our citizens.
- Put Arctic and Baltic issues higher on the UK political agenda; strengthen the Antarctic Treaty and deepen our commitment to Arctic security, reinforcing defence cooperation with Nordic and

Baltic partners and stepping up work with allies and partners to ensure the peace, security and stability of the Arctic as climate change, competing geopolitical ambitions and mineral exploitation threaten its fragile environment.

- Adopt a more prominent UK leadership role on development and enforcement of the Law of the Sea, including new maritime technologies, robust regulation relating to deep sea mining, undersea cables and ship registration, and considering the need for a dedicated UN body for maritime security; work with partners and allies to protect the principles of freedom of navigation and to disrupt shadow fleet operations; explore ways of using the maritime interests and influence of the UK and UK Overseas Territories to increase global compliance with regulatory regimes.
- Work to revive arms control and conflict prevention; be ready to propose new confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) in Europe, including on new technologies when circumstances allow.
- Work to keep the US engaged as a reliable multilateral partner, especially in the UNSC, G7, G20 and NATO, focusing on areas where it retains a strong interest.
- Work with Canada and other like-minded 'middle powers' to develop an effective cooperation mechanism as a counterweight to states seeking to undermine multilateralism and the international rules-based order.
- Rethink how we might target and deliver aid most effectively, possibly with more use of multilateral channels; reverse Labour's ODA cut (funding the uplift in defence spending via an increase in digital services tax to 10 per cent) and set out a roadmap for returning to 0.7 per cent of GNI.

- Work with like-minded member states of the Council of Europe to ensure the European Court of Human Rights continues to uphold the rule of law and liberal values.

7 Conclusion

7.0.1 Policy making in the international sphere must contend with multidimensional complexities and uncertainties. Some important assumptions have helped the UK to navigate these complexities in recent decades, for example, broad universal respect for international law and multilateral institutions, the post-Cold War advance of democratic values, and an unquestioning US commitment to European security. However, due to two decades of increasingly reckless Russian disregard for international commitments and a US President unashamedly putting narrow self-interest ahead of international rules, democratic principles and the common good, the world has become a more unpredictable and disorderly place. The consequences for the UK are profound.

7.0.2 A stable, fair world is unequivocally in our national security interest. The UK, working with like-minded allies and partners, must do its utmost to help shape the international environment and be capable of acting as a counterweight to autocratic world leaders who would replace a cooperative, equitable model of multilateralism with a competitive multipolar world order based on power and self-declared spheres of influence.

7.0.9 A responsible, robust international security policy that responds to the challenges of an unpredictable global environment, protects UK national interests and defends liberalism must be fundamental to the Liberal Democrat policy platform. A responsible approach, grounded in democratic values and sustainable in an unpredictable environment, will enable us to engage confidently in a turbulent world.

8 Glossary

AI – Artificial Intelligence: Computer systems capable of performing tasks that usually require human intelligence, including pattern recognition, decision-support, language processing and autonomous systems.

AWACS – Airborne Warning and Control System: Aircraft equipped with radar and communications systems to provide surveillance, early warning, command and control.

CDO – Civil Defence Office: The proposed government department responsible for coordinating national resilience, civil defence planning and whole-of-society preparedness.

Critical enablers: Capabilities that make military operations possible, such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, air-to-air refuelling, logistics, communications and command systems.

CRINK states: A shorthand term for China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, used to describe increasingly aligned authoritarian states that cooperate where their interests overlap.

CSBMs – Confidence- and Security-Building Measures: Diplomatic and military measures designed to reduce mistrust, improve transparency and lower the risk of accidental conflict.

CVR – Civil Volunteer Reserve: The proposed reserve of trained civilian volunteers who could support national and local resilience during emergencies or crises.

DIP – Defence Investment Plan: The Government's plan for funding and delivering future defence capabilities, including major equipment and technology programmes.

EDA – European Defence Agency: An EU agency that supports cooperation between European countries on defence capability development, research and procurement.

EDF – European Defence Fund: An EU fund supporting collaborative defence research and development between European countries and defence industries.

EDIP – European Defence Industry Programme: An EU programme intended to strengthen Europe's defence industrial base and support joint procurement and production.

EPF – European Peace Facility: An EU funding mechanism used to support partners, including through military assistance and support for Ukraine.

ESCG – European Strategic Capabilities Group: The proposed grouping of European states intended to provide strategic leadership on defence industrial cooperation, capability development and European security autonomy.

Grey-zone or hybrid warfare: Hostile activity below the threshold of conventional war, including cyber-attacks, sabotage, disinformation, political interference and economic coercion.

ICJ – International Court of Justice: The principal judicial organ of the United Nations, which settles legal disputes between states and gives advisory opinions on international law.

ICC – International Criminal Court: A court that investigates and prosecutes individuals for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and aggression where jurisdiction applies.

ISR – Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance: The collection and analysis of information needed to understand threats, support military planning and guide operations.

JEF – Joint Expeditionary Force: A UK-led group of Northern European countries able to cooperate militarily, including outside formal NATO structures where appropriate.

LRCs – Local Resilience Committees: The proposed local bodies that would coordinate civil preparedness, emergency planning, training and public communication.

Mini-lateral grouping: A smaller group of countries working together on a specific issue, often more flexibly than a large multilateral institution.

MoD – Ministry of Defence: The UK government department responsible for defence policy, the armed forces and military capability.

NATO Article 3: The part of the North Atlantic Treaty requiring allies to maintain and develop their own capacity to resist armed attack.

NATO Article 5: NATO's collective defence clause, under which an armed attack against one ally is treated as an attack against all.

NRAP – National Resilience Action Plan: The Government's plan for strengthening the UK's preparedness for emergencies and national resilience challenges.

OCCAR – Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation: A European organisation that manages collaborative defence equipment programmes between participating states.

ODA – Official Development Assistance: Government aid spending intended to promote economic development and welfare in lower-income countries.

OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe: A regional security organisation that supports dialogue, conflict prevention, election monitoring and confidence-building across Europe and beyond.

PESCO – Permanent Structured Cooperation: An EU framework through which participating member states cooperate on defence capability development and military projects.

SAFE – Security Action for Europe: An EU defence funding programme providing loans to support increased defence investment and joint procurement.

SDP – Security and Defence Partnership: The UK-EU framework agreed in 2025 to support closer cooperation on security and defence.

SDR – Strategic Defence Review: The Government's 2025 review of UK defence policy, military capability, readiness and future security requirements.

SEAD – Suppression of Enemy Air Defences: Military activity designed to disable, destroy or neutralise an opponent's air defence systems.

Strength, Resilience and Partnership: Securing Britain and Defending Liberalism in Turbulent Times

Policy Paper 164

This paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 7.4 of the Federal Constitution.

Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of the federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom.

The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local Party determine the policy of the Party on all other issues, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas.

The Party in England has chosen to pass up policy-making to the Federal level. If approved by Conference, this paper will therefore form the policy of the Federal Party on federal issues and the Party in England on English issues. In appropriate policy areas, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland party policy would take precedence.

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International Security Working Group

The members of the working group who have prepared this paper are listed below.

Dr Ben Jones (chair)

Calum Miller MP

James MacCleary MP

Mike Martin MP

Baroness Smith of Newnham

Dr Christine Cheng

Hannah Bettsworth

Michael Davenport MBE

Cllr Richard Dickson

Khadija El Morabit

Rowan Fitton

Neil Grayston

Cllr Noel Hadjimichael

Dr Maksim Karliuk

Iain King CBE

Martyn Knights

Dominic Martin CVO

Sian MacLeod OBE

Tamara Moranjak

Andrew Tucker

Richard Cole

Humaira Sanders

Note: Membership of the working group should not be taken to indicate that every member necessarily agrees with every statement or every proposal in this paper.

Staff

Alexander Payne

Jack Bell

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