

# Linking arms with the UK



THE UK'S 2024 *Strategic Defence Review* (SDR), launched recently by Prime Minister Keir Starmer, seeks to comprehensively evaluate the UK national defence strategy. Just like Australia's earlier defence reviews, resulting in the 2023 *Defence Strategic Review* (DSR) and the 2024 *National Defence Strategy* (NDS), the SDR aims to respond to the changing global security environment and prepare the UK's armed forces to meet current and future challenges. This comes at a time of geopolitical instability, rising tensions in the Middle East and increasing technological threats such as cyber-attacks and misinformation campaigns from both state and non-state actors.

The SDR will engage a wide range of stakeholders, including military



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personnel, industry leaders, academics and international partners, and is chaired by three external reviewers: Lord Geoffrey Robertson, Dr. Fiona Hill and General Sir Richard Barrons. Their inclusion marks a shift towards integrating external perspectives and expertise, which is aimed at addressing inter-service rivalry and ensuring a more holistic view of the UK's defence needs. The review will also focus on increasing

the UK's defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030 consistent with the Government's earlier election promise.

One of the early themes of the SDR is its declared emphasis on further NATO alignment. The UK's commitment to a 'NATO-first' policy means that the SDR will ensure the UK's armed forces are prepared to contribute effectively to the alliance's collective security objectives. The ongoing war in Ukraine and the threat of a resurgent Russia drive a lot of this thinking, as does the urgent need to modernise the UK's nuclear deterrent, which remains a cornerstone of the country's defence strategy. The SDR is also likely to affirm the Government's support of AUKUS, focusing especially on Pillar 1 (nuclear-powered submarine development) as well as Pillar 2

(emerging technology development).

Understanding how the UK prioritises its commitment to NATO as well as balancing its commitments to AUKUS and its regional presence more broadly will be interesting. 2025 sees the UK's carrier strike group in the Indo-Pacific region, culminating with its participation in Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025. This is a positive sign that the UK is committed to upholding the rules-based global order in East and North Asia. That said, given the parlous state of the UK economy, other spending pressures in key portfolios (including social services and national health) and an almost daily reminder of Russian aggression against European states, it is difficult to see how both operational theatres can be both effectively resourced and prioritised.

Other recent reporting around the SDR has acknowledged that the UK's defence infrastructure has been 'hollowed out'. Incoming Defence Secretary John Healey has recognised the need to address long-standing issues such as poor procurement practices and ongoing recruitment challenges. For defence companies in Australia, the question of what opportunity and role may present for them inside the UK's domestic defence industry should be front of mind, especially when considering the recent success for UK companies born out of Australia's DSR and NDS. BAE Systems, Babcock, Supacat, Qinetiq, etc should all be congratulated and celebrated for the capability that they are delivering to the future Australian Defence Force. Any effort that the SDR can make to further 'on-shore' or, perhaps more accurately, 'friend-shore' supply chains and key industries, including increasing

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Australian defence industry presence in the UK would be welcome.

Personnel pressures, workforce skilling, training and education will also heavily feature in the SDR as the UK, like Australia, seeks to improve personnel recruitment and retention for serving military members. The same applies to the people who make up the defence industry workforce. Given the scramble across all militaries and defence industries for skilled personnel, a 'no poaching' rule should be considered. The SDR should also consider more deeply the earlier Australian DSR-inspired conversations around an 'AUKUS visa', enabling the movement of skilled personnel without the overheads of complex visa rules and tiresome immigration systems.

The 2024 SDR, expected to conclude in the first half of 2025, will serve as a foundational document for the UK's

defence policy over the next decade. It aims to provide a clear roadmap for addressing both traditional and emerging threats, ensuring that the UK remains a key player on the global stage while safeguarding its national security interests. For Australia, critical questions around the UK's ongoing commitment to the Indo-Pacific region, its prioritisation of NATO, its budget pressures, and the challenges of its future workforce will be key to understanding its impacts. Both the Australian Government and Australia's defence industry should also seek to better understand market entry into the UK and look for opportunities to bid for emerging and future UK defence acquisition projects. This would deepen the relationship between the two countries and reflect the opportunity UK defence companies were afforded in Australia following the release of the 2023 DSR and 2024 NDS. **DTR**