

Complex security and strategic latency: the UK Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015

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In its first Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) in 2010, the British government committed its successors to undertake such a review every five years.¹ Whichever party (or parties) form the government, the next SDSR is expected to begin soon after the May 2015 general election. In the meantime the machinery of government has once again entered the 'phoney war' stage of the defence cycle: preliminary work and positioning has begun prior to the formal start of the review process.² This is an uncomfortable time for the UK's principal political parties. The current government's defence and security policy includes the questionable assumption that equipment spending can grow within a defence budget that seems set to shrink and against a pledge that the regular army will suffer no further cuts.³ Yet these contradictions are as nothing when compared to those experienced within the Labour Party. Labour's defence team has indicated that it has no wish to be constrained by the current defence and security review timetable, which it believes would produce only a rushed outcome. Instead, a Labour government would hold a strategy review once the 2016 Comprehensive Spending Review has been completed. In other words, Labour would conduct a review, which it would describe as 'strategic', only after the defence budget for 2016–19 had been fixed.⁴

Further complicating this picture is the prospect of another coalition government. In their joint debate on Trident, Britain's force of four nuclear ballistic missile-carrying submarines, the Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru

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¹ HM Government, *Securing Britain in an age of uncertainty: the Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948 (hereafter SDSR) (London: The Stationery Office, Oct. 2010), p. 9.

² Paul Cornish and Andrew M. Dorman, 'Breaking the mould: the United Kingdom Strategic Defence Review 2010', *International Affairs* 86: 2, March 2010, pp. 395–410.

³ See Ben Riley-Smith, 'David Cameron opposes cutting soldier numbers after next election, head of Armed Forces reveals', *Daily Telegraph Online*, 9 Nov. 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11219789/David-Cameron-opposes-cutting-soldier-numbers-after-next-election-head-of-Armed-Forces-reveals.html>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁴ Vernon Croaker, 'Ambitious and realistic: Labour's vision for Britain's defence and security', speech given at Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), London, 24 March 2014, <http://press.labour.org.uk/post/80568857412/vernon-coaker-mp-labours-shadow-defence>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

and the Green Party confirmed their continuing opposition to the retention of the capability.⁵ Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP's First Minister of Scotland, has stated that the price of her party's collaboration with a Labour government would include the scrapping of Trident, and the Greens have added that they would want to see Britain's armed forces reduced to a home defence force.⁶ In response, Labour leader Ed Miliband has indicated that he might be willing to compromise on Trident in any deal with the SNP.⁷ In contrast, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) has indicated that it plans to pledge to increase the defence budget and create a Veterans Administration.⁸

Whenever the next SDSR takes place, it is essential that the review should begin in the right place and with the right question. Very much the wrong place for SDSR 2015–16 to begin would be with the budget and what are likely to be ever-tightening spending plans on the part of the Treasury. Of course, no strategy worthy of the name—whether political, military or commercial—should ever be designed without taking full account of available resources, human, financial and material. In times of existential threat and national emergency it might be appropriate to prioritize defence spending above all else.⁹ Fortunately, the UK is not in that position and will not be for the foreseeable future. To acknowledge that is far from suggesting, however, that the UK can or should take a 'holiday' from defence spending; even the most cursory examination of international security would produce a list of challenges and threats to which the UK will be obliged or expected to respond. Although this list would evidently be beyond the scope of control of the Treasury, any argument for sustained defence spending to meet a range of complex, unpredictable and non-existential security challenges will nevertheless be difficult to make; the quantum of resources available will remain a matter of political choice rather than objective necessity.¹⁰ Yet while constraints on resources must certainly influence national strategy, they are no substitute for strategic thought.

Another false start would be for the SDSR to focus on military capabilities. Certainly, many aspects of the capabilities discussion, such as personnel numbers and strategic force enablers, should be in the reviewers' minds from the outset. Armed forces require the recruitment and retention of high-quality people, as

⁵ Richard Norton-Taylor, 'Trident: parliament debates £100bn project—at last', *Guardian Online*, 20 Jan. 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/defence-and-security-blog/2015/jan/20/trident-uk-s-nuclear-arsenal-commons-debate>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁶ Lindsay McIntosh, 'SNP leader names her price for deal with Labour', *The Times*, 26 Jan. 2015, p. 10; 'Peace and defence', Green Party website, <http://policy.greenparty.org.uk/pd.html>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015; Rachel Sylvester and Alice Thomson, 'I'm sure we can find a council house for the queen. We'll build lots more', *The Times*, 24 Jan. 2015, pp. 36–7.

⁷ Matthew Holehouse, 'Ed Miliband hints he may back replacing Trident with cheaper system', *Telegraph Online*, 5 Jan. 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ed-miliband/11325940/Ed-Miliband-hints-he-may-back-replacing-Trident-with-cheaper-system.html>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁸ Robin Brant, 'UKIP set to include defence boost in election battle plan', *BBC Online*, 29 Jan. 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-31036661>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁹ See G. C. Peden, *Arms, economics and British strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ 'The size of the defence budget is sometimes portrayed as a matter in which the government has little or no say. This is contrary to common sense. The defence budget is a function of political choice . . . rather than the inevitable effect of some unstoppable force of nature': Paul Cornish, *Strategy in austerity: the security and defence of the United Kingdom* (London: Chatham House, 2010), p. 24.

well as access to enough trained reserves. And as full-time members of the armed forces diminish in number, so it is vital to invest in key enablers or ‘force multipliers’ such as reconnaissance and surveillance platforms, ensuring that whatever is left after the next round of cuts is as capable and as scalable as it can be, with the ability to reconstitute and regenerate capabilities as necessary. All that said, just as the budget cannot be the source of national strategy, neither can military capabilities be the sufficient explanation for it.

The proper place to begin is with politics. This is not to suggest that SDSR 2015 should be consumed by an interminable and rather neurotic debate about ‘Britain’s place in the world’, or by the quest for an illusory ‘grand strategy’; it is, rather, to suggest that a simple question should be asked and reiterated throughout the course of the review: ‘What is it all for?’ Here the task of the SDSR should be to provide a gearing mechanism between three components moving at different speeds (and one possibly in reverse): a constrained (and very probably tightening) defence budget; a force posture which is adaptable but which cannot change direction in an instant; and a security future which promises ambiguity, volatility and urgency. That gearing mechanism is known as risk. The government changed the tone of the public debate significantly in 2010 when it made risk the basis of national security and strategic planning. If SDSR 2015 continues along the same path then it will be based upon a sober and comprehensive account of the security risk picture and should show where the UK force posture corresponds to that picture and, importantly, where it does not. There are indications, however, that the risk-based approach to national strategy is becoming compressed or foreshortened—a tendency which might limit the outlook and confidence of the SDSR 2015–16.

Beginning with a review of the context within which SDSR 2015–16 will be prepared, this article examines both enduring and immediate challenges to the national strategic process in the United Kingdom and concludes by arguing for *strategic latency* as a conceptual device which can complement, if not reinvigorate, the risk-based approach to national strategy and defence.

Context

In 2010 the coalition government made a commitment that the UK’s national defence and security policy would be reviewed according to a fixed timetable: henceforth, the incumbent government would conduct a defence and security review every five years. Thus the UK was placed in a position similar to that of the US, with its cycle of Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDRs)—a programme that has continued for almost two decades. In both cases, the rationale seemed persuasive: a major review conducted once in every electoral cycle would achieve a closer alignment of key policy areas (particularly foreign, security and defence policy); would ensure that policy and strategy were more finely tuned to prevailing security challenges and threats; and would ensure that defence spending was more closely geared to the incumbent government’s budgetary priorities and spending

constraints.¹¹ In the UK, in broader political and electoral terms, the fixed review cycle would also serve as a statement of the executive's close engagement in a key area of public policy, at a time when the British electorate was becoming increasingly involved in the controversy surrounding the UK's military commitments to Iraq and Afghanistan. The UK's periodic defence review was also to be one part of a broader programme of security reviews: as well as the SDSR, a new National Security Strategy (NSS) would be published every five years; a report on its implementation would be submitted annually to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the National Security Strategy; and a publicly available National Risk Register would be published regularly, of which the source document, a classified National Security Risk Assessment, would be revisited every two years.¹²

The US QDR process has overlapped relatively straightforwardly with the four-year US presidential election cycle; of the five QDRs to have taken place, the three most recent (2006, 2010 and 2014) have taken place more or less at the mid-point of the presidential term. The UK experience has not been so straightforward, however. There has been no tradition in the UK of fixed terms in office for the executive and the legislature. That situation changed only recently with the Fixed-term Parliaments Act of September 2011, whereby general elections would henceforth be held according to a fixed five-yearly cycle, with the first under the Act taking place in 2015. As suggested above, there would seem to be merits in bringing the defence and strategic review process more closely into alignment with the electoral cycle. Yet there are concerns in the UK that a fixed, five-year electoral cycle might have a detrimental effect on the efficiency, legislative capacity and therefore effectiveness of parliament; a concern which, presumably, would extend to parliament's role in legislation for, and oversight of, national strategy and defence. A more pressing concern is that at present the UK's electoral cycle appears to be exactly coincident with the NSS/SDSR cycle, meaning that the first task of any new or re-elected government must be to begin a defence and security review. Moreover, the United Kingdom also has a three-year spending review cycle which adds a further complication.¹³ The result might be a defence and security review which is either rushed (if the new government wishes to devote as much legislative time as possible to other areas of public policy) or delayed (if the new government is lacking in experience of defence and security and decides to embark upon a lengthy review period from first principles). There is also concern that the review, whenever it takes place, will be out of sync with the government's three-year spending programme and that the review's conclusions will be too tightly governed by existing spending plans.

The positions taken in the NSS and SDSR 2010 were intended to suggest not only a more rigorous and systematic approach to defence and security policy and

¹¹ Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman, 'Blair's wars and Brown's budgets: from Strategic Defence Review to strategic decay in less than a decade', *International Affairs* 85: 2, March 2009, p. 252.

¹² HM Government, *A strong Britain in an age of uncertainty: the National Security Strategy* (hereafter NSS), Cm 7953 (London: TSO, Oct. 2010), pp. 11, 25–6.

¹³ See Paul Cornish and Andrew M. Dorman, 'Fifty shades of purple? A risk-sharing approach to the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review', *International Affairs* 89: 5, Sept. 2013, p. 1189.

planning on the part of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, but also a more worldly and confident approach to matters of national security and defence. The government's confidence was, however, tinged with caution. Conscious of the straitened financial circumstances in which it found itself, rather than focus on traditional defence concerns, the new government made national *economic* security its priority. The second sentence of the Queen's Speech to parliament on 25 May 2010 declared in simple terms that the new government's 'first priority is to reduce the deficit and restore economic growth'.¹⁴ Significantly, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) chose not to take issue with this argument: in late 2010 the newly appointed Chief of the Defence Staff observed that 'the financial security of the nation must be a primary consideration of any review';¹⁵ months later the Permanent Under-Secretary at the MoD opined that 'without a sound economy we will not have the funds to tackle our security problems';¹⁶ and early in February 2011 the Secretary of State for Defence added his weight to the consensus:

national security is not just about protecting ourselves from external threats. For our generation, the internal threat of debts and deficits is just as much of a challenge, and will have a profound effect on our prosperity and influence ... David Cameron's decision to form a coalition was necessary in the national interest. It follows that the primary responsibility of that coalition is to eliminate the deficit.¹⁷

This cautious, almost world-weary tone also infiltrated the SDSR itself, the opening paragraphs of which contained the following words: 'We have . . . left to 2015 those decisions which can better be taken in the light of further experience in Afghanistan and the wider economic situation.'¹⁸ Yet for all this caution, there are grounds to suggest that both NSS and SDSR might nevertheless have been overconfident and not made sufficient provision against an uncertain future, both financially and strategically.

In financial terms, the MoD largely achieved the target it set for itself in the SDSR of addressing its 'unfunded liability of around £38 billion over the next 10 years',¹⁹ absorbed the costs of the replacement of the UK's Trident force and reduced the planned defence budget by 7.5 per cent. However, the coalition government has failed to reduce the current account deficit to the extent it had hoped and the national debt continues to grow.²⁰ Both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party have pledged to address the financial problem in the next parliament with a mixture of further reductions to public expenditure and tax increases.

¹⁴ Queen's speech, 25 May 2010, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/05/queens-speech-2010-2-50580>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

¹⁵ 'Forces chief says defence cuts "an acceptable risk"', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 Nov. 2010.

¹⁶ Ursula Brennan, 'Transforming defence: a British perspective on defence in a time of financial challenge', speech at the Heritage Foundation, Washington DC, 2 Feb. 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transforming-defence-a-british-perspective-on-defence-in-a-time-of-financial-challenge>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

¹⁷ Liam Fox, 'There is only one way to give Britain a fighting chance', *Sunday Telegraph*, 13 Feb. 2011.

¹⁸ SDSR, p. 9.

¹⁹ SDSR, p. 15.

²⁰ 'The tax free recovery', *The Economist*, 20–25 Sept. 2014, p. 31.

With the strategic future in mind, a key feature of the 2010 review was that risk was to be the central organizing principle of UK national strategy. In some respects, this was an unexceptional and rather obvious step to have taken; when strategic concerns are many and varied, and when resources are too constrained to meet all conceivable obligations and choices, it is only rational that national strategy should be a matter of risk management, seeking to achieve the most agile strategic prioritization and re-prioritization as circumstances change. There seems little doubt that the UK government was, and remains, serious in its adoption of the risk-based approach; the classified National Security Risk Assessment, for example, has been reviewed regularly, as promised. It was unusual, nevertheless, for the government both to have been relatively open as to its new, risk-based strategic methodology and to have been willing to allow elements of the UK strategic risk picture into the public debate.

As the basis for national strategic positioning (particularly under current strategic and financial conditions), risk can scarcely be bettered. Yet it is a methodology with two significant vulnerabilities. First, although risk analysis, properly understood, is not an attempt to predict the future, it is generally believed to have precisely that ambition and its credibility is judged in those terms. Thus, when events do not conform to a given risk picture, some will call into question the methodology as a whole. Second, risk analysis and management is not an exclusive methodology, available only to governments with intelligence agencies and sophisticated analytical capability. Every sentient, pattern-forming human being is his or her own expert in risk. The risk-based approach to strategy is therefore high risk in a political sense, in that it creates very many hostages to fortune and then invites a very open debate. Consequently, it can matter little whether the UK's risk-based national strategy is as clever and as reasonable as it can be; frustratingly for its authors, its credibility will always be determined by what it failed to predict or when assumptions about acceptable levels of damage become untenable.

There have, certainly, been a number of crises and events recently which the 2010 strategy review did not anticipate. The most obvious of these are the UK's military involvement in Libya in 2011; instability and violence on the Russia–Ukraine border from 2014; the chronic weakness of the euro and the resultant downward pressure on defence spending among many European NATO members; the emergence of a new form of violent Islamist extremism in Syria and Iraq, in the form of the Islamic State (ISIS); and the Ebola virus epidemic in West Africa. What is most significant about each of these various developments is not the crisis or event itself, but the broader strategic trend it represents. First and most clearly, while the Ministry of Defence might, tacitly at least, have assumed a version of the 'ten year rule' of the 1920s and 1930s—a relatively quiet period strategically, following the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, during which the Future Force 2020 could be designed and implemented—that hope was soon undermined by UK involvement in North and West Africa and in the Middle East. Second, another unsettling reality is that not only is Europe not immune from organized, cross-border violence, but that some powerful states in the region have not after

all renounced violence as a tool of international politics. Third, the significance of ISIS is not only that it embodies a spectacularly brutal combination of terrorism and insurgency, but that its goal is to take territory not in order to achieve statehood and to be recognized by the United Nations, but to establish an alternative to the Westphalian model of statehood in the form of a regional Muslim caliphate.

Other criticisms of the 2010 national strategy review and its risk-based approach include the claim that too little information was given as to the point at which a given risk would cease to be tolerable and would begin moving up the list of priorities, and whether other risks would have to be demoted as a result. Some strategic risks were deliberately overlooked altogether by the NSS and SDSR, such as the effect on UK national strategy of a vote for Scottish independence in the 2014 referendum. But these complaints relate to specific political decisions rather than systemic problems; in other words, these are complaints concerning the manner in which the risk-based approach was implemented rather than a disagreement with its adoption.

The UK's risk-based approach to national strategy is also likely to be tested in at least two other, more structural respects. The first of these concerns the broad nature of the security and defence challenge which national strategy is designed, in part, to confront. Here, the problem is both that the challenge is complex and uncertain and that there is, nevertheless, a tendency to fetishize both challenge and response in the form of one succinct expression or another. Long familiar with the notion of 'asymmetric' and 'hybrid' warfare,²¹ the UK national strategic debate must now contend with 'ambiguous warfare' as well as 'permanent' or 'new generation' warfare.²² But when in history has warfare not been 'asymmetric', 'hybrid', 'ambiguous' and 'new generation'? These terms admittedly have some value in describing the organized use of armed force by certain actors, in certain circumstances and at certain moments. Yet they do not, necessarily, say very much about the nature of strategy in the early period of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, the fetishizing instinct seems hard to resist, particularly in UK defence circles; as if an aggressively marketed word or two could suffice to explain not only the nature of the strategic threat to the UK but also the optimal response to that threat. History suggests that strategy has rarely been as straightforward

²¹ Asymmetric warfare is best understood as war between one side which is militarily weak yet determined and ingenious, and another side which is militarily powerful yet complacent and inattentive. The scope of hybrid warfare has been defined as follows: 'Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior in the battle space to obtain their political objectives' (Frank G. Hoffman, 'Hybrid vs. compound war. The Janus choice: defining today's multifaceted conflict', *Armed Forces Journal*, Oct. 2009, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/hybrid-vs-compound-war/>, accessed 13 Feb. 2015.)

²² Although it offers more than a hint of Sun Tzu's ideas, 'permanent' or 'new generation' warfare is widely considered to be a Russian innovation. It has been defined as follows: 'The Russian view of modern warfare is based on the idea that the main battle-space is the mind and, as a result, new-generation wars are to be dominated by information and psychological warfare, in order to achieve superiority in troops and weapons control, morally and psychologically depressing the enemy's armed forces personnel and civil population. The main objective is to reduce the necessity for deploying hard military power to the minimum necessary, making the opponent's military and civil population support the attacker to the detriment of their own government and country': Jānis Bērziņš, *Russia's new generation warfare in Ukraine: implications for Latvian defense policy*, policy paper no. 2 (Riga: National Defence Academy of Latvia, April 2014), p. 5.

as this, however. Paul Cornish, a sceptic of hybrid warfare, has suggested that, 'while hybrid warfare might offer important insights into the ability of certain individuals and organizations to fight in an unprecedented variety of ways, on closer inspection it proves to be a rather lazy idea which reveals no more than is already known about conflict and is little more than a hedging posture masquerading as a new paradigm'.²³

The second test concerns risk appetite—a central component of risk management in any sphere. British public opinion appears to have lost faith in arguments for military intervention overseas. One of the more striking features of the UK's involvement in recent conflicts, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been the public affection shown to individual members of the armed forces, together with the very evident sympathy for those killed and injured. Where the deployment of armed force is concerned, however, public opinion is much less supportive of government; opinion research undertaken in 2014 'shows broad opposition to recent and potential future British military incursions'.²⁴ For the UK's national strategic risk managers, therefore, the public appetite for risk must seem ambivalent, unpredictable and confusing.

Each of these points represents a substantive challenge to the risk-based approach adopted in the 2010 strategy review in terms of scope, methodology and assessment. The intelligent response to these arguments would be to find ways to improve the risk-based approach to UK national strategy—an approach which is, after all, not yet five years old. It would be unwise, however, in the face of these challenges and criticisms, to abandon the risk-based approach altogether in favour of some other methodology. Choice and risk are the two sides of the strategy coin. Effective national strategy requires the ability to make deliberate, informed choices in some areas, and to assess and accept the risk in others, where gaps in capability arise or where some plausible scenarios cannot be addressed. If choices are made to have/do/prepare in some areas but not in others, then those choices can be made either through guesswork or on the basis of an approach which is as systematic (if not scientific) and iterative as it can be. Strategic choice is the function of government, and there is no serious rival to risk as the basis of national strategy. As Brunschot and Kennedy have observed: 'Individuals and agencies cannot simply respond with endless resources to mitigate the damage that hazards create: they have to find a balance in managing risks.'²⁵

For the UK's armed forces to be effective in managing risks requires government not only to support a broad and balanced spectrum of capability but also to acknowledge the indispensable role of the armed forces in a risk-based national strategy: a role described compellingly by the UK Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) in December 2014 as 'the country's risk managers of last resort'.²⁶ Yet a

²³ Cornish, *Strategy in austerity*, p. 18.

²⁴ Thomas Scotto, 'Age-old conflict', in Economic and Social Research Council, *Britain in 2015* (Swindon: ESRC, 2015), p. 24.

²⁵ Erin Gibbs Van Brunschot and Leslie W. Kennedy, *Risk balance and security* (London: Sage, 2008), p. ix.

²⁶ General Sir Nicholas Houghton, Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture, RUSI, 17 Dec. 2014, <https://www.rusi.org/events/past/ref:E545211393622E/>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

durable and credible risk-based approach to UK national strategy is nevertheless proving difficult to achieve; on top of the various challenges outlined above, we suggest ten other reasons why the UK strategic environment is not at present amenable to the risk-based approach.

Chronic disease: ten rules for defence and security reviews

In his evidence to a House of Commons Defence Committee inquiry into SDSR 2015–16, Lord Hennessy suggested there might be a series of unwritten or ‘non-ferrous metal’ laws governing the conduct of a defence (or defence and security) review.²⁷ The search for a pattern in UK defence and security reviews is a developing theme. Something similar appeared in this journal in 2010, in the form of the argument that defence reviews followed a four-phase, constantly recurring ‘Groundhog Day’ cycle which they appeared unable to escape.²⁸ The current government’s decision to move towards a regular set of defence and security reviews was, in part, an attempt to break out of this trap; whether this approach will succeed remains to be seen. However, we suggest that even if the cycle is broken there remain at least ten unwritten rules which, unless addressed by the government, will influence the character and quality of the next SDSR, tightening and foreshortening the scope of the risk-based approach.

Hennessy identified the first rule of all defence reviews to be that they are quickly overtaken by events.²⁹ In other words, as the late Sir Michael Quinlan once observed, while those challenges which the MoD (and wider government) can identify and can plan to deal with might be managed or deterred, it can be Donald Rumsfeld’s ‘known unknowns’ that cause the damage.³⁰ For example, John Nott was widely criticized for his 1981 defence review in the light of the 1982 Falkland Islands conflict. Yet as far back as the 1966 defence white paper, it was accepted that the Falkland Islands could no longer be defended, and this then became accepted government policy.³¹ More recently, a number of commentators and analysts have suggested that SDSR 2010 was rapidly overtaken by the conflict in Libya in 2011. While many in government have argued that this was not the case, the Syrian civil war, the emergence of ISIS, and the Russian annexation of Crimea and involvement in eastern Ukraine have all cast a shadow over the durability of the 2010 review.³²

The second rule is that governments find it difficult to sustain the logic of their own strategy review. Thus, although the 1952 global strategy paper concluded

²⁷ Lord Hennessy, in House of Commons Defence Committee, *Towards the next Defence and Security Review: part one*, 7th Report of Session 2013–14, vol. 1, HC.197 (London: TSO, 2014), minutes of evidence, 24 April 2013, Ev. 1, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmsselect/cmdfence/197/197.pdf>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

²⁸ Cornish and Dorman, ‘Breaking the mould’, pp. 395–410.

²⁹ Hennessy, minutes of evidence, 24 April 2013, Ev. 1.

³⁰ Hennessy, minutes of evidence, 24 April 2013, Ev. 1; Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and unknown: a memoir* (London: Sentinel, 2011), p. xiii.

³¹ See Andrew Dorman and Michael Kandiah, ‘The Falklands witness seminar’, Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, occasional paper no. 46 (Shrivenham: British Army Review, 2003).

³² Cornish and Dorman, ‘Fifty shades of purple’, pp. 1183–1202.

that the advent of thermonuclear weapons meant that the United Kingdom could no longer be defended against such weapons, the buildup of the UK's air and civil defences continued unabated.³³ One outcome of the risk-based approach to national strategy adopted in 2010 should be closer coherence between assessment and planning. However, it can be difficult to prevent incoherence at this level if strategic assessments knowingly exclude certain risks on the grounds that they are politically too sensitive. If the September 2014 Scottish referendum had found in favour of independence then the UK would have faced profound changes to its national strategic posture. Yet it would seem that in the MoD no contingency planning was allowed.³⁴ A similar situation might present itself after the May 2015 general election, the outcome of which might give rise to a referendum on the UK's continuing membership of the European Union as well as another Scottish referendum in which the removal of the UK's nuclear deterrent force from Scotland will once again become a possibility.³⁵ If the next UK government finds the risk-based approach to national strategy to be too awkward a proposition, either because it would create too many hostages to fortune or because it would seek to address certain risks about which the government would prefer not to be explicit, then SDSR 2015–16 could be out of date even as it is being written.

The third rule is that reviews are inevitably underfunded. In part, this is because historically governments only engaged in such reviews when the balance between commitments, capabilities and resources had been lost, or when a government was seeking to reduce either its spending in general or defence spending in particular. Thus, the 1975 Mason review aimed to reduce the amount the UK spent on defence by taking as its point of reference the average proportion of GDP spent on defence by the UK's NATO allies.³⁶ Underfunding can also be the result of misalignment. In the 1998 Strategic Defence Review an imbalance between strategic goals, proposed force structures and the defence budget subsequently negotiated with Gordon Brown (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) meant that at the most basic level the review failed to connect ends, ways and means.³⁷ Underfunding can also often result from an excess of optimism about the savings to be made from efficiency and from the sale of defence assets.

The fourth rule of UK defence reviews is that they are constrained by the capability decisions by which they are immediately preceded: constraints which severely limit the government's scope to assess and plan strategically. The 1981 Nott review, again, was constrained by recent orders for new equipment for the British Army (Challenger main battle tanks and Warrior armoured personnel

³³ John Baylis and Alan Macmillan, 'The British global strategy paper of 1952', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 15: 2, 1993, pp. 200–226.

³⁴ See Andrew M. Dorman, 'More than a storm in a tea cup: the defence and security implications of Scottish independence', *International Affairs* 90: 3, May 2014, pp. 679–96.

³⁵ Matthew Holehouse, 'SNP name their price: abandon Trident to put Miliband in Downing Street', *Telegraph Online*, 15 Nov. 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/SNP/11233496/SNP-name-their-price-abandon-Trident-to-put-Miliband-in-Downing-Street.html>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

³⁶ Roy Mason, 'Setting British defence priorities', *Survival* 17: 5, 1975, pp. 217–23.

³⁷ For a more favourable recent assessment of the 1998 review, see Jonathan Shaw, *Britain in a perilous world: the Strategic Defence and Security Review we need* (London: Haus, 2014).

carriers), by the acquisition of Trident and by the election promise to restore the UK's air defences.³⁸ Pledges made since SDSR 2010 are extensive: retention of the Red Arrows display team (to be provided with new aircraft); commissioning of a second aircraft carrier (requiring a crew and, by implication, additional aircraft); a commitment to participate in NATO's new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force; a promise that no further cuts will be made to the army's regular strength; and the construction of new frigates in BAE Systems' Scottish yards.³⁹ In addition, there has been a series of orders for goods and services ranging from maintenance of the majority of the army's vehicles to the provision of air-to-air refuelling aircraft with accompanying infrastructure and some reservist crews. These orders indicate that in terms of PPP/PFI⁴⁰ contracts alone, the MoD is committed to spending annually somewhere between £1.837 billion and £1.409 billion over the next ten years.⁴¹ As pressure mounts to reduce the non-ring-fenced UK defence budget, these decisions and commitments have the effect of building an internal ring-fence, with the remaining areas of the discretionary defence budget having to provide the required reductions.

The fifth rule of UK defence reviews is that certain areas will be considered 'off limits' for party political, domestic or international reasons. The 1998 SDR made specific exceptions for the acquisition of Eurofighter and the Trident system, for example: the former because of fears over British jobs and Germany's commitment to the programme; the latter reflecting the Labour leadership's wariness of its unilateralist wing. No matter which party forms the next government, it will be confronted by other areas of persistent controversy. The British Army's regimental system can provoke particularly strong sensitivities; both Labour and Conservative parties will be reluctant to countenance reductions in Scottish regiments (despite the fact that Scottish infantry regiments are not generally well recruited) for fear of bolstering the SNP's claim that 'Westminster' does not act in Scotland's interest.⁴² Similarly, the so-called 'Joanna Lumley factor' will mean that the Brigade of Gurkhas is unlikely to be reduced. The cumulative effect of these tacit decisions will be that the next defence review's room for manoeuvre will be limited and that English regiments might carry a disproportionate burden of any cuts.

³⁸ See Andrew Dorman, 'John Nott and the Royal Navy: the 1981 defence review revisited', *Contemporary British History* 15: 2, 2001, pp. 98–120.

³⁹ 'Red Arrows' "future safe under David Cameron", *BBC Online*, 20 Feb. 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21514999>; George Parker and Sam Jones, 'Second UK carrier is given the nod', *Financial Times Online*, 5 Sept. 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/27af1658-351d-11e4-aa47-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3PN1truTe>; Ewen MacAskill, 'Nato to announce 4,000-strong rapid reaction force to counter Russian threat', *Guardian Online*, 5 Sept. 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/05/nato-4000-rapid-reaction-force-baltics-russia>; Simon Johnson, 'Michael Fallon: Type 25 frigates will be built on Clyde', *Daily Telegraph Online*, 1 Dec. 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scotland/11265858/Michael-Fallon-Type-26-frigates-will-be-built-on-Clyde.html>; Riley-Smith, 'David Cameron opposes cutting soldier numbers', all accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁰ Public–Private Partnership and Private Finance Initiative.

⁴¹ Philip Dunne, Hansard (Commons), Written Answers, 20 Oct. 2014, answer no. 210085.

⁴² For the politics of the British Army's regimental system, see Andrew Dorman, 'Reorganising the infantry: drivers of change and what this tells us about the state of the defence debate today', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 8: 4, 2006, pp. 489–502.

When the scale of impending defence cuts becomes apparent to the UK's service chiefs, the sixth rule can be expected to manifest itself. At this point, unanimity begins to fracture as the chiefs' allegiance to their respective services (Royal Navy, Army, Royal Air Force) takes precedence over their commitment to defence overall. In the 1981 Nott review this breakdown occurred immediately after Sir John Nott had held an 'away day' at Greenwich to consider the resource imbalance. On this occasion the RAF sought to remind the government of its commitment to improving the nation's air defences while the army offered a solution it knew the government could not accept. The result was a focus on the navy which, as a result, bore the brunt of the reductions.⁴³ In 2015–16 the situation is compounded by the exclusion of the three service chiefs from the MoD's governing Defence Board as part of the Levene reforms:⁴⁴ a situation which seems likely to shift the balance of the chiefs' already divided loyalties yet further towards their respective services and away from a comprehensive, risk-based approach.

The perennial question is: which of the chiefs will break cover first and begin to campaign against the other services, and when? For 2015 the crux might prove to be the Defence Secretary's decision to overrule the First Sea Lord's suggestion that new frigates could be built overseas,⁴⁵ a decision which should strengthen the navy's resistance to any further cutbacks. For its part, the army appears to have set the level of its regular manpower as the governing consideration. The RAF has been quieter, perhaps because it has been relatively successful in securing programme approval in recent years for the retention of the Sentinel aircraft and Predator drones after the withdrawal from Afghanistan and it has even retained an additional Tornado squadron as a result of the mission to combat ISIS in Iraq.⁴⁶ It might also seek to adopt its 1981 approach and ask for the retention of the Eurofighter Typhoon tranche 1 aircraft, pointing to the pressure on the UK's air defences from the recent increase in Russian flights nearby.⁴⁷ Given its traditional commitment to the fast jet force, the RAF will almost certainly focus upon the acquisition of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). Rumours abound suggesting reductions in the size of the UK order and about production delays for this fifth-generation aircraft.

The seventh rule is that allies and partners will attempt to influence the outcome of the review directly and will also be drawn in by the individual services. Here the United States has generally played the largest role and was even rumoured to have vetoed some areas from consideration.⁴⁸ This is not unprecedented; in past

⁴³ Dorman, 'John Nott and the Royal Navy', pp. 98–120.

⁴⁴ Lord Levene of Portsoken (chairman), *Defence reform: an independent report into the structure and management of the Ministry of Defence*, June 2011, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27408/defence_reform_report_struct_mgt_mod_27june2011.pdf, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁵ Severin Carrell, 'Michael Fallon overrules Royal Navy head over Scotland's shipyards', *Guardian Online*, 12 Nov. 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/nov/12/michael-fallon-royal-navy-frigate-clyde-scotland-shipyards-zambellas>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁶ 'II(AC) Sqn re-role and reformation of 12(B) Sqn', RAF website, 12 Jan. 2015, <http://www.raf.mod.uk/news/archive/reformation-of-12b-sqn-12012015>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁷ Julian Borger, 'Russian ambassador summoned to explain bombers over the Channel', *Guardian Online*, 30 Jan. 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/29/russian-bombers-english-channel-ambassador-summoned>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁸ Nicholas Watt, 'Hillary Clinton "worried" by UK defence cuts', *Guardian Online*, 15 Oct. 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/oct/14/hillary-clinton-uk-defence-cuts>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

reviews all three services have sought support from their US counterparts to influence the British government.

The sixth and seventh rules give rise to the eighth: that the threat of defence cuts can lead also to intra-service rivalry. Each of the services is composed of factions or tribes seeking to achieve ascendancy and, in particular, control of the senior posts within that service. In other words, the next review is likely to see not just inter-service rivalry but also intra-service dissent as the factions within each service struggle for supremacy.

In the Royal Navy a battle for ascendancy has traditionally taken place between surface ship officers and submariners. Two other groups, naval aviation and the Royal Marines, have historically tended to have far less influence, although both have played a prominent role in the UK's recent operations. At present, the balance of power within the navy appears to have shifted: several Royal Marines officers have reached the rank of lieutenant-general and the current First Sea Lord is a former helicopter pilot. The acquisition of two large aircraft carriers, together with continuing commitments to NATO's northern flank and to expeditionary operations, suggest that this shift might be sustained. Yet as resources tighten, the decision as to which capabilities must be retained and which can be surrendered could result in submarine and surface ship officers once again pushing for a reduction in the amphibious fleet, with the Royal Marines being handed to the army and the aircraft carrier programme being questioned.

The British Army is more obviously divided along tribal lines as a result of the regimental system, and here the debate will focus on contending analyses of the future of conflict, each of which will suggest a different configuration of land forces. Thus, Royal Armoured Corps and Royal Artillery regiments are likely to emphasize the need to support NATO's eastern allies in the face of a revanchist Russia—a task for which heavy armour will be indispensable. This argument would not only propose further spending on heavy equipment such as main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and artillery, but would also mean a shift in the army's balance of power away from the special forces, the Parachute Regiment and the county infantry regiments. Conversely, these lighter forces, which over recent years have dominated much of the army's senior hierarchy, can be expected to continue to emphasize the expeditionary, rapid response requirement.

For the Royal Air Force, a shift of focus away from counter-insurgency and nation-building towards more traditional warfare would allow it to argue for additional fast jet squadrons and, in particular, for the acquisition of the conventional F-35A fifth-generation aircraft (as well as the short take-off and vertical landing F35-B destined for the UK's aircraft carriers) and retention of all its Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft rather than helicopters and support aircraft.

The ninth rule of UK defence reviews is that during both the 'phoney war' and 'review' phases the government will be bombarded by a media campaign. In the first phase media attention will focus on how the review should be run, how ambitious it should be and which service is likely to do best or worst in the process. As far as ambition is concerned, some commentators and analysts argue

that a serious defence review must begin with an attempt to define the country's desired strategic end-state.⁴⁹ The task of each of the three services would then be to decide upon the equipment and force structure needed to achieve the grand strategic goal, after which the task of the Treasury would be to foot the bill. The second phase ('review') consists of attempts to promote or protect particular programmes, capabilities, units or bases. In this vein it is not unusual to see 'red cards' being deployed. A noteworthy example of this practice is the popular argument made in some quarters that without 'proper' (i.e. preferential) management the size of a given service will fall below what is known as its 'critical mass', a point below which the service in question will lose its ability to function. For all that arguments of this type resonate with media and public opinion, they are no less fatuous, however. In the first place, this argument is not new. The 1975 Defence Review was based on minimum force numbers which were far higher than the strength of Britain's armed forces in 2015. Second, empirical evidence for the 'critical mass' argument is not easily available, and for good reason. The notion that the British Army would suddenly cease to function should its manpower fall a little below an arbitrarily selected figure (such as its regular current strength) is clearly weak. Moreover, many nations manage well enough with armed forces smaller than those in the UK, Australia being a prime example.

The final rule is that the government of the day will claim to have gained control of defence inflation and cost overruns. With the notable exception of the 1981 Nott review, most defence reviews are accompanied by some reform to the defence acquisition process to prevent such aberrations. The 1998 SDR offered 'smart procurement', which by the time of the 2003–2004 review had become 'smart acquisition'. The 2010 review was accompanied by the appointment of Bernard Gray, who had recently produced *The defence strategy for acquisition reform*, as head of Defence Equipment and Support.⁵⁰ This, together with the appointment of Lord Levene to recommend wholesale changes to the MoD, allowed the government to argue that it would halt defence inflation. The MoD's success in the equipment field remains a matter of debate. The overall fall in individual incomes in real terms over recent years has meant that personnel inflation appears to have come to a halt. But personnel inflation is likely to return as the comparative pay of the civilian workforce starts to rise. This will be exacerbated by the continuing trend within the armed forces to promote more officers to more senior appointments, despite having in 2010 made pledges to the contrary.⁵¹

Acute symptoms: shadows on the X-ray

As well as the chronic malaise affecting defence reviews and strategic decision-making in the UK, there are other, more pressing anxieties that have emerged

⁴⁹ See e.g. Julian Lindley-French, *Little Britain? Twenty-first century strategy for a middling European power*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, second edition 2015.

⁵⁰ *The defence strategy for acquisition reform*, Cm. 7796 (London: TSO, 2010), https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228575/7796.pdf, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁵¹ Anna Soubry, Hansard (Commons), Written Answers, 7 Nov. 2014, answer no. 212165.

since the publication of the 2010 SDSR. These concerns, suggesting the possibility of a more immediate crisis in the UK strategic outlook, are already casting shadows over preparations for the 2015–16 SDSR and could also have the effect of foreshortening the risk-based approach to national strategy.

The first shadow relates to decisions taken in the 2010 SDSR. The economic circumstances confronting the government at the time, as well as the financial situation in which the MoD found itself, set the scene for an urgent tightening of management processes within the ministry, major cuts in proposed expenditure and the search for further efficiency savings.⁵² Yet in several respects, problems first addressed in 2010 continue to bear upon UK national strategy and will influence the outcomes of the 2015–16 SDSR. The most obvious of these relates to the decision to scrap the Nimrod MRA4 maritime patrol aircraft force and to accept a ‘gap’ during which the UK would be without a maritime patrol aircraft.⁵³ Yet during 2014 it became clear that increasing tension between the West and Russia had led to an increase in the number of foreign submarines operating in or close to British waters. Whether or not these activities represented a deliberate challenge to the security of the UK, they did prompt concern as to the security of the Trident submarine force as it leaves and enters harbour.⁵⁴ As a short-term remedy, the MoD has solicited help from NATO allies. But in the longer term, the 2015–16 review will have to decide whether there is a convincing case for filling the capability gap created in 2010 and, if so, by what means; possibly by acquiring patrol aircraft from the United States.⁵⁵

In a similar vein, the new government will also have to address the pace and size of the F-35 acquisition programme. Whatever might be said of the decision to commission two Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers, their acquisition is now irreversible. The next step must, therefore, be to ensure that as the two carriers enter service they are equipped with the air group for which they have been designed. Each carrier is designed to operate 36 JSFs. So far, however, the UK has ordered just eight aircraft (four of which are test aircraft), with some 14 envisaged before the first aircraft carrier enters service and a suggestion that the final number might now be no more than 48 by 2030; too few to equip one aircraft carrier with 36 aircraft.

The second shadow is that cast by Britain’s long involvement in campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. At one level this relates to the question of whether future British governments (mindful of, and increasingly constrained by, public opinion) will again be prepared to deploy armed forces on combat operations. Taken together, the August 2013 House of Commons vote to reject UK participation in military operations against Syria and the September 2014 vote to support military

⁵² See Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman, ‘National defence in the age of austerity’, *International Affairs* 85: 4, July 2009, pp. 733–53.

⁵³ It should be remembered that the outgoing Labour government had already withdrawn the Nimrod MR2 force from service and left a gap in the UK’s capabilities.

⁵⁴ Ben Farmer, ‘Britain forced to ask Nato to track “Russian submarine” in Scottish waters’, *Telegraph Online*, 9 Dec. 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11283926/Britain-forced-to-ask-Nato-to-track-Russian-submarine-in-Scottish-waters.html>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁵⁵ Anna Soubry, Hansard (Commons), Written Answers, 23 Jan. 2015, answer no. 221307.

action over Iraq against ISIS not only demonstrate parliament's ability to hold two conflicting ideas at once but also raise a more fundamental question: what are the UK's armed forces actually for? If the United Kingdom is becoming what has been termed a 'post-heroic state',⁵⁶ then the rationale behind both the UK's relatively high defence budget and its expeditionary force posture comes into question.

At another level, much has been made of the operational experience that Britain's armed forces have gained from these wars.⁵⁷ Yet there is a risk in assuming too readily that experience hard won in a particular operational environment (or environments) will be sufficient preparation for future security challenges. Ironically, this assumption could even be said to have impeded the development of the UK's approach in the early years of the campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The broader point is that the UK's armed forces, like those of many of its NATO partners, have been so focused on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that their training programmes have become distorted and narrowed. The UK now has a generation of personnel who lack training in, and experience of, other types of operation for which they might be required in the future. For example, in Iraq and Afghanistan artillery was often used in a very limited way. Training for more traditional artillery fire missions, such as counter-battery fire, received less emphasis, with the result that there is a generation of artillery officers who might not have the breadth of skills of their predecessors. To overcome these deficiencies the army, in particular, needs to engage in a major retraining programme as part of the development of its Army 2020 force structure. Yet in times of financial stringency, the training budget can often be one of the first areas to be cut in order to provide short-term savings and to help offset intended cuts in equipment plans.

Finally, close and enduring experience of armed conflict can also affect the scope and flexibility of the national strategic outlook. In the United States, the operational intensity of the Iraq and Afghanistan operations, combined with their remoteness from the generality of public opinion, may have fostered the notion of the omni-capable soldier–scholar–statesman: typically, a senior general with vast operational experience promising the ability and the breadth of vision to coordinate all levers of national power in order to achieve complete and enduring victory. In the UK, experience gained in Iraq and Afghanistan has arguably resulted in an overemphasis on the operational (and even tactical) level to the exclusion not only of such basic military concepts as deterrence and coercion but also of what might genuinely be described as strategic-level thought.⁵⁸

To ask: 'What are the UK's armed forces actually for?' introduces the third shadow on the X-ray, raising questions concerning the wider uses of the armed

⁵⁶ Edward N. Luttwak, 'Toward post-heroic warfare', *Foreign Affairs* 74: 3, May–June 1995, pp. 109–22, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/50977/edward-n-luttwak/toward-post-heroic-warfare>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁵⁷ Paul Cornish, 'Hard power and soft politics: anticipating the UK Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015', Written Evidence, House of Commons Defence Committee Inquiry, 'Future Force 2020', 28 Oct. 2014, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defence-committee/future-force-2020/written/14662.html>, accessed 13 Feb. 2015.

⁵⁸ These arguments have been picked up and consolidated in Christopher L. Elliott, *High command: British military leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars* (London: Hurst, 2015).

forces. At the direction of the current CDS, the different operating environments (maritime, land, air and cyber) for UK armed forces are being reassessed. Predictably, the different elements of the armed forces have seen this reassessment as an opportunity to argue the merits of this or that service, capability or equipment. Yet there are other strategically and politically difficult aspects of the future operating environment that will have to be considered by the 2015–16 SDSR. The first of these concerns has become known as ‘defence engagement’.⁵⁹ In simple terms, what role could there be for UK armed forces overseas in circumstances other than war and conflict, and on what scale? The current deployment of British military personnel to Sierra Leone as part of the UK’s contribution to the fight against the Ebola virus suggests that the MoD could contemplate small, unplanned deployments using residual capacity of manpower and equipment.⁶⁰ Yet the development of the army’s ‘adaptable force’ posture suggests that non-confrontational, operational deployments of this sort might no longer be considered peripheral and optional. If this is the case, then the 2015–16 review will need to establish the limits of ambition for defence engagement commitments.

Another operational environment is the UK itself, prompting questions as to the nature and scale of the support offered by the armed forces to UK civilian authorities. In recent years the armed forces have been highly visible at moments such as the 2012 Olympics and the 2014 flood crisis. A task for the 2015–16 SDSR might therefore be to bring up to date the formal role of the armed forces in reinforcing and enhancing the UK’s emergency services, with such surge capacity as might be considered reasonable.

The final shadow hanging over the 2015–16 SDSR relates to the overarching idea of strategy and the search for a central organizing idea that will lend coherence to the whole review. The suggestion of a ‘strategic vacuum’ in the UK, first made in 2009 in this journal and taken up by the then CDS in his annual Christmas lecture, should have been the beginning of a debate about the ability of government to look ahead, to make the best possible decisions and to adapt as circumstances change.⁶¹ The result, however, has been the proliferation of the term ‘strategic’ without much accompanying thought. Just as in the 1990s most military activities and capabilities were thought to have been improved by the simple addition of the word ‘joint’ to their title, so in the past five years the UK defence debate has seen almost everything reclassified as ‘strategic’ to no apparent benefit. In a sense the idea of strategy has moved from refined cottage industry to crude mass production.

In a series of evidence sessions before various House of Commons committees, various academics, analysts, retired officials and officers have each made the case that their insights should be the basis of UK national strategy. There have even been calls to resuscitate tired initiatives such as the Advanced Research Assessment

⁵⁹ MoD, *International defence engagement strategy* (London, 2013), https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/73171/defence_engagement_strategy.pdf, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁰ MoD, ‘UK military to provide further measures to tackle Ebola’, press release, 8 Oct. 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-military-to-provide-further-measures-to-tackle-ebola>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁶¹ Cornish and Dorman, ‘Blair’s wars and Brown’s budgets’, pp. 247–61.

Group, a body which was closely involved in the questionable decision to expand the NATO mission in Afghanistan in 2006.⁶² The problem for officials and ministers is whom to listen to against so much background noise, and how to distinguish good ideas from bad. One thing is certain: if every commentator is correct in their claim that they alone are able to think ‘outside the box’, then the area outside the box has become rather overcrowded. Since the ‘strategic vacuum’ genie was released there have been many critiques not only of the armed forces’ performance in Iraq and Afghanistan but also of the 2010 SDSR itself. The government’s response to the latter will serve as an important indicator of the sustainability of national strategy in the UK.⁶³ A government which lacks strategic self-confidence might react to adverse comment on the 2010 SDSR by overturning many of its core decisions, whatever their quality. An oversensitive reaction of this sort could bring about the reversal of some of the more sensible changes to have been made in the UK strategic outlook over the past five years, with calls for yet more root-and-branch change.

Conclusion: ‘liquid strategy’ and ‘strategic latency’

For those engaged in developing the forthcoming SDSR, the challenge appears to be more involved than that confronted by their predecessors in 2010. The international security context is far more complicated, confused and contradictory; the UK’s financial predicament is still grave; security threats and challenges will emerge that cannot be ignored; the population’s appetite for foreign military engagement appears to be restricted by the strategic equivalent of a gastric band; and prevailing conditions suggest that the risk-based approach to national strategy might be difficult to sustain.

The risk-based approach, adopted in public in the UK as recently as 2010, is in principle indispensable to the effective management of strategic complexity in a time of financial constraint. The risk-based approach cannot, however, answer every question asked of it, and there are worrying indications that it is being overwhelmed by the breadth, diversity and duration of security challenges and threats, and by the shortage of resources. It is becoming increasingly difficult for those charged with preparing and implementing national strategy to think for the long term and to make appropriate preparations. Both methodologically and temperamentally, therefore, the national strategic process is being compressed into a short-term, or at most medium-term, outlook: one that is broadly consistent with the UK’s new five-year political cycle. And as the strategic perspective shortens, so it becomes both more important and more difficult to demonstrate that the defence budget represents immediate value for money. In other words, we have a vicious circle.

This is not to suggest that pro-defence arguments have lost all traction, although it is clear that their vision is shortening and narrowing. There is, for example,

⁶² See Cornish and Dorman, ‘National defence in the age of austerity’.

⁶³ Michael Fallon, Hansard (Commons), Written Answers, 26 Jan. 2015, answer no. 221587.

the argument for international credibility: the insistence that the defence budget should not be allowed to fall below the NATO target of 2 per cent of GDP.⁶⁴ Then there is the argument from comparison: when set against an annual social protection budget of approximately £222 billion, the UK defence budget of £38 billion does not appear excessive.⁶⁵ And there is the argument from equity: if some areas of government spending can be ‘ring-fenced’ and protected from cuts, then surely defence and security should be one of those areas.⁶⁶ Other defendants take a sectoral approach, arguing for a particular operational environment—land, sea, air or cyber—or a particular capability to be given privileged status in the debate. The weakness common to all these arguments is that national strategy cannot be entirely a matter of short-term inputs—cash, personnel, capabilities; nor can it be sensibly reduced to an argument between maritime strategy, expeditionary warfare and air power. What matters, of course, is what defence can deliver over time: strategic-level outputs commensurate and coincident with emergent security threats and challenges.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s image of a ‘liquid phase of modernity’ is possibly the last thing national strategic planners might wish to read:

Social forms (structures that limit individual choices, institutions that guard repetitions of routine, patterns of acceptable behaviour) can no longer (and are not expected to) keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set. Forms, whether already present or only adumbrated, are unlikely to be given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies because of their short life expectation: indeed, a life expectation shorter than the time it takes to develop a cohesive and consistent strategy, and still shorter than the fulfilment of an individual ‘life project’ requires.⁶⁷

If ‘liquid modernity’ is the problem, then how can national strategy, with its traditionally deliberate and rigid ways, respond—particularly if it is indeed the case that the risk picture which underpins the UK’s defence and security posture is becoming compressed and foreshortened to a five-year outlook? Equipment procurement, personnel recruitment and military training programmes cannot all be turned on a sixpence and redirected to the latest emerging security challenge, and so the notion of ‘liquid strategy’ flowing with ease from one strategic challenge to the next is probably far-fetched. What would be useful, however, would be to think in terms of ‘strategic latency’ as a device to complement the risk-based approach to national strategy. Strategic latency is generally associated with technological innovation and development. For the purposes of this article,

⁶⁴ Adrian Johnson, Malcolm Chalmers and Saqeb Mueen, ‘RUSI briefing says UK defence spending due to fall below NATO target of 2% of GDP in 2015’, RUSI briefing paper, 4 Sept. 2014, <https://www.rusi.org/news/ref:N54087ED64A525/#.VM7iCRNyYcA>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁵ Philip Inman and George Arnett, ‘Budget 2014: the government’s spending and income visualised’, *Guardian Online*, 21 March 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/mar/21/budget-2014-tax-spending-visualised>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁶ ‘Time to protect UK defence budget’, *Financial Times Online*, 31 Jan. 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/baa9b780-6bb9-11e2-8c62-00144feab49a.html#axzz3QYFJ1nTU>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid times: living in an age of uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 1.

strategic latency would make it possible for defence to think beyond the short term, to anticipate plausible strategic futures and to ensure that the long-range capability plan is not geared too tightly to a relatively short-term (i.e. five-year) risk picture. The UK's armed forces seem likely to face further reductions, and in such circumstances it will be necessary to ensure that forces are deployed only when all other strategic tools available to government have been tried and only when they can be used efficiently and decisively. But the more serious concern is that when financial scarcity bites, strategic resilience suffers. Strategic latency is accordingly an argument for national strategic resilience; for maintaining a balanced mix of armed forces even though (or, rather, because) such a force posture might not appear consistent with a compressed and foreshortened risk-based approach to national defence. If the risk-based approach to national strategy asks 'what might challenge us in the near term?', then strategic latency addresses the question 'what capabilities might be needed in the longer term?' One benefit of strategic latency as an organizing principle might be to encourage the return of conventional deterrence to the national strategic discourse. But its principal contribution would be to stretch the risk-based approach further into the distance, by insisting that a broad mix of military capabilities must be considered a long-term asset rather than a short-term liability.