

Prospects for a pocket superpower

On March 1 the US military sounded the alarm over British defence cutbacks, with General Ray Odierno, Chief of Staff of the US Army, saying he was concerned about the UK no longer being a credible ally. But even this warning shot failed to propel defence to the centre of the campaign of the May 7 general election.

The government is turning a deaf ear to retired generals and backbench MPs pleading for a commitment to the 2 per cent of GDP target for defence spending which David Cameron endorsed at the NATO summit in Wales in September. The *Financial Times* has described Cameron's attitude to the current geopolitical upheaval as 'insouciant indifference.' But he is not alone. After bitter experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, the debacle in Libya, and the House of Commons vote against intervention in Syria in 2013, none of the major parties is keen to focus on defence and security at election time.

At a Chatham House event on UK foreign policy after 2015, experts were asked to rank security threats facing Britain. Russia, Syria and the wider Middle East were all mentioned but Lord Robertson, former NATO Secretary-General, identified the main threat as



The Trident submarine, HMS Victorious. Britain's defence budget is under strain

'complacency'. He said: 'We are failing to focus enough attention not just on the defence budget but also the Foreign Office and intelligence budgets. Our biggest enemy is ourselves.'

It was left to Peter Hennessy, professor of contemporary British history, at Queen Mary, University of London, to conclude: in the current financial climate Britain could no longer aspire to be a 'pocket superpower' and might have to look at losing some capabilities.

Mary Kaldor, professor of global governance at the LSE, tried to shift the debate away from arms spending to strengthening international agreements. 'The idea that

we can match Russia conventionally, or even imagine a conventional war with Russia, is inconceivable.'

In Washington, by contrast, defence is set to play a vocal part in the 2016 election campaign, with the presumed Republican challengers accusing Barack Obama of 'weakness' by losing control of the Middle East, appeasing Iran and preferring dialogue to confrontation with China.

Even Hillary Clinton, if she runs for president in 2016, is expected to talk up a more forceful foreign policy than the one implemented by the Obama administration, in which she served as secretary of state for four years.

On the surface, the robust

tone of US political debate suggests the US has the will to remain the world's leading power. But, as Joseph Nye, the US political scientist, points out in his essay, *Is the American Century Over?*, foreign affairs is not isolated from Washington's dysfunctional politics. 'In foreign policy, the constitution was written in a way that invites the president and congress to struggle for control. Strong economic and ethnic pressure groups struggle for their self-interested definitions of the national interest.'

As for Britain, the debate on defence and security will have to wait for a formal review after the election.