

The ‘Integrated Review’, Command Paper and Industry Strategy

The three linked Government papers – the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy; the Ministry of Defence Command Paper (titled ‘Defence in a Competitive Age’); and the Defence Industry Strategy – lay out the Defence and Foreign Policy vision for the UK up to 2030 and beyond. As such they are full of operating philosophy and intent, which is repeated endlessly but there is actually comparatively little of a specific nature as to equipment procurement. That is not to say, however, that the Integrated Review and its accompanying papers do not set out a coherent vision for the future, because they do, and generally it is an upbeat one. We have been informed that the military, the MOD and the Defence industry have known for some time that in certain areas we cannot hope to match our potential adversaries, e.g. tank-for-tank with Russia, and that in order to dominate in any trial of strength we must change the way we fight. These documents lay out that intended change of direction.

While what is intended is the re-establishment and then the continuation of a technological advantage over possible adversaries, and investment is to be directed towards that end, there are some nuggets of information about personnel recruitment and organisation, hardware acquisition and disposal, plus a few questions that have been left unanswered.

The intention to fully integrate the Reserves within the MOD and Armed Forces is encouraging. If nurtured properly and not just treated as ‘gap fillers’ for when the Regulars go off to war, the Reserves have a lot to offer and can lift operations to a higher level. In some spheres it is the civilian reserves who are the true professionals. Also, the reorganisation of some Army units to make them more nimble and expeditionary in nature will enhance the UK’s ability to nip certain developing situations in the bud and hold potential adversaries at arm’s length. Those who consider that the UK should concentrate solely on local theatre defence need to realise that you cannot win a war by fighting only a defensive campaign. In any future conflict, such a policy would, by default, relegate the UK to the ranks of the defeated.

The announcement that the UK’s stock of nuclear warheads is to be increased from 180 to 260, is probably a tacit acceptance that against large and expansive countries like Russia and China, a credible nuclear deterrence requires a credibly large mega tonnage, plus the ability to reliably deliver it. As the UK is the only nuclear power with a single delivery system, generally relying on a single submarine at sea, the time might be right to diversify potential delivery and have some of those additional warheads available for use in a tactical role, as our potential adversaries have.

The MOD’s Command Paper states that Regular Army manpower will be reduced from the present (real) level of 76,000 to 72,500, side-stepping acknowledgement that the former is already 6,000 short of the intended. Thus the intended reduction could be said not to be 3,500 but 9,500. Ordinarily one could argue that this massive reduction in establishment numbers, on top of those that have gone before, would hollow out the Army to the point where it became almost irrelevant. If, however, the hi-tech option kicks in and every front-line soldier becomes a squad leader, controlling eight fully armed robots, then effectiveness might be increased and the human hordes of opposing armies may be at a disadvantage.

Item 7.35 of the Command Paper and page 94 of the Industry Strategy suggest a greater emphasis on long range rocket and mobile artillery fire for the Army. This should be taken in context with the proposed reduction in tank numbers because it has a direct bearing on that issue. The recent conflict

between Russia and Ukraine, and the Azerbaijan/Armenia battles, where drones and other reconnaissance assets have been used to spot the targets, the tank's vulnerability on the modern battlefield to long range artillery and rocket fire has been rudely exposed. The updating to Challenger III standard but reduction in numbers is an acknowledgement that the tank still has a use but its effectiveness in many scenarios is reduced.

Item 7.36 of the Command Paper suggests a greater commitment to short and medium range land-based air defence for the army. Although the hardware to provide this is available from sovereign industry sources, this is a capability that has largely been neglected. It is very important however if our high tech, effective, but few in number, assets are to be protected from an enemy that will try to interdict them.

Item 7.39 of the Command Paper points out that the army will be retiring their older CH-47s (Chinooks). Maybe they will tell the RAF about that before it happens?

Item 7.41 of the Command Paper commits to the ordering of more F35s beyond the present 48 but does not say of what type? A recent article pointed out that the specification for a catapult and arrestor system the MOD have sent feelers out for, will not be powerful enough to launch a fully loaded F35C! One would have thought that if such a system is to be fitted to the QE carriers, primarily to launch and recover drones, then a little forward thinking would be engaged and a fully capable system acquired. If the UK is to continue as a credible alliance partner and force multiplier, then it is incumbent upon her to be able to integrate fully with her allies. Acquiring a system that cannot fulfil that capability is rather spoiling the ship for a barrel of tar.

Item 7.42 of the Command Paper commits to the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), but it is notable that nowhere within these papers is there any suggestion that the program has a carrier element in it? Item 7.45 mentions the operation of only three Wedgetails, thus possibly confirming an earlier suggestion that the initial intent for five has been cut. Interestingly there is no mention of upgrading the Voyager aircraft so that they can refuel the P8, Wedgetail, Rivet Joint and, if purchased, the F35A. As we are so intent in acting as an alliance force multiplier, and have done so since WW2, one has to wonder why our air refuelling aircraft are not fitted with both drogue and boom as others are?

Noted is the fact that the Sentinel R1 has been dropped from the RAF line-up. The supposed out of service date is this month (March 2021), with the P8 and Protector taking up its roles. Those P8s are going to be busy!

Also noted is the intended disposal of 14 C130s (item 7.44 of the Command Paper), which this observer views as very short sighted. When operations become extreme there are never enough transport aircraft and the Hercules has shown itself to be an extremely flexible and reliable performer. In extremis, when there is sufficient wind over the deck, you can even land one on the QE carriers; as the Americans demonstrated with 21 unassisted landings and take offs on the USS Forrestal in October 1963. Now that would be a super COD!

Possibly one of the most important things to come out of these three documents is the intent to have a closer and more streamlined working relationship with industry and in effect, draw it more fully into the country's defence. The MOD have obviously taken note of the investigations that have been carried out in the past few years, by Sir John Parker, Philip Dunne MP, the House of Commons

Defence Committee and others, which can only benefit the Armed Forces. Possibly one of the hurdles that the MOD have to overcome in this quest, is not a reluctance upon the part of industry, but rather a percentage of their own personnel who have grown used to the previously leisurely approach to government acquisition projects, but who now have to step up and improve their game.

The Secretary of State for Defence is the so-called ‘Shipbuilding Tsar’, and the Industrial Strategy contains some guidance on the way ahead for that industry. Beyond a suggestion within these three papers that the Type 45 destroyers will be given a radar update with a hint that an anti-ballistic missile capability may also be installed, and a commitment to provide a continuous submarine building programme, page 90 of the Industry Strategy document mentions that a Defence & Security Industrial Strategy update to the 2017 Ship Building Strategy will soon be published. Hopefully this will lay out in more detail how the government will actually interface with the ship building industry and explain more fully the acquisition aims that are laid out in page 91. Those aims go beyond the already stated intent to procure the Fleet Solid Support ships, Type 26, 31 and 32 frigates. They include a Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance ship (i.e. a specialised survey ship), up to six Multi-Role Support Ships (MRSS) to deliver Littoral Strike and Maritime Special Operations and the design of a Type 83 destroyer to replace 45s in the late 2030s.

It is interesting to note how quickly intent and the policy that follows can change. In the context of the MRSS, ten years ago the five year old RFA Largs Bay (an auxiliary amphibious assault ship) was sold to Australia. Not so long ago Defence UK spoke out against the possible disposal of the assault ship HMS Albion or Bulwark and following that the actual sale of HMS Ocean, a helicopter assault ship, and at that time the Navy’s only flat-top! This was going on when the general thrust of policy was to reduce the UK’s amphibious capability, now it appears that trend has been reversed.

The three documents talk a good job but it remains to be seen how much of that intent can be delivered and, after the smoke has settled, what systems will be discarded and projects cancelled that have not yet been announced! As mentioned in the last paragraph, situations can change very quickly and subsequently the ability to follow an intended route may be barred. History has shown that Defence Reviews and the resulting policies can very quickly become victims of circumstance (“Events, dear boy, events!” as Harold Macmillan famously put it) and while the Integrated Review has considered threats from abroad and terrorist action from within, it has studiously neglected to address the ‘gorilla in the room’ which possibly offers the greatest threat to Britain’s defensive security. The threat is that by 2030, or shortly after, this United Kingdom of ours may no longer be United. The forthcoming elections to the Scottish Parliament offer the very real prospect that a separatist majority in that assembly might soon push for a referendum leading to separation of Scotland from the rest of the UK, thus triggering the dissolution of the United Kingdom itself.

The MOD and the military are contingency organisations, tasked with the job of identifying risk, working through the various scenarios and making plans to handle the situations that might evolve. While political expedience may require such preparations to be kept under wraps, one hopes that, behind closed doors, they are being made so that, in the event that Scottish voters opt for separation, the defence and security of the British Isles do not fall into total disarray.

Fred Dupuy, Non-Executive Director, Defence UK