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A Guide to Evaluating SDSR 2015

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There is no more important duty of government than to provide adequate defence and security, a duty which should have the first call on government funds. It is from this perspective that this autumn's Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR15) should be judged.

In the first Conservative Budget for almost 20 years, the Chancellor announced that for the rest of the decade Defence spending would be a minimum of 2% of GDP. This is the NATO benchmark advocated so strongly by the Prime Minister at the summit in Wales last year. At last Defence has been accepted as a special case!

Yet there are a number of caveats in the welcome to this recent change of heart, not least what has now been added to defence spending to reach the 2% calculation. These changes, and the details in the Chancellor's Summer 2015 Budget Red Book, raise concerns as to whether spending just 2% of GDP will enable critical capability gaps arising from SDSR 2010 to be filled, although we are encouraged by his recent statement that **he will spend "what is necessary"**. The Defence Secretary has given his assurance that the 2015 review will be full and thorough and will consult widely. We most certainly need a fundamental change in approach from the 2010 review if the nation and our allies are to be reassured that current threats are being responsibly addressed.

Whilst recognising the enormous budgetary challenge in 2010, any critical appraisal must first identify the weaknesses of the 2010 review, examine the major changes that have taken place in the world since that date, and look for a strategic vision which will chart a convincing track for the nation's security.

In this paper we shine a light on these matters. If, in the process, we enable interested parties to judge better whether the 2015 SDSR is fit for purpose, then our objective will have been realised.

2010 Review

SDSR 2010 did at least get some things right. It acknowledged the need for a far better cross-government approach, all underpinned by a National Security Strategy (NSS). It emphasised the growing importance of cyber threats to civilian and military targets, and emphasised the soft and hard power approaches needed to combat the Al Qaeda terrorist threat.

The two main pillars of the Government's approach to defence and security were to protect the UK and its strategic interests against all forms of attack and to use all available means to shape the global environment towards better stability. All this was somehow to be delivered against a backdrop of significant MOD budget cuts.

According to the House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC) report – HC 512 March 2015 – the budget cuts of 8-9% may have shaved some 20-30% off our military capacity: out went the Harrier jump jets and the operational aircraft carriers, out went the Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA), and a 20,000 reduction in Army personnel was initiated. In a document entitled "*Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*", SDSR10 was portrayed as affordable and appropriate for the demands of Afghanistan and any minor events we might have to face.

Shortsightedly, SDSR10 was thus framed almost entirely around existing commitments, and hoped to employ 'horizon scanning' to anticipate future threats. What the authors failed to anticipate was what actually occurred – The Arab Spring; the 2011 conflict in Libya; the 2014 rise of Islamic State (ISIL) and the ensuing chaos across the Middle East; the 2014 invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine by Russia; the mass migration of peoples fleeing conflicts; the rise of Boko Haram across sub-Saharan Africa; sabre rattling by Argentina; the vulnerability of our nuclear deterrent submarines in transit; the rapid increase in Russian bomber incursions into our airspace and the determination of China to assert her strength in the Far East.

In determining national security capabilities, SDSR10 was guilty of much wishful thinking. It created gaps and weaknesses that were exploitable by adversaries and alarmed our most important ally. Analysis of each surprise is beyond the scope of this short paper, but a number of threads are clear. "*Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*" should have meant being prepared for the unexpected. Within weeks of SDSR10's publication, it was clear that scanning the horizon had failed as events in Tunisia spawned the Arab Spring, leading to major rebellions in Libya, Egypt and Syria. Then the SDSR's delusions were exposed as the West's intervention in Libya sharply demonstrated that without US involvement to suppress even Gaddafi's small air force, NATO's European forces were not capable of executing a decisive air campaign. Even after the US had 'opened the door' by destroying Libyan air defences, Britain and her allies still required very considerable US support.

Moreover, when the Syrian civil war crossed President Obama's 'Red Line' of chemical warfare, there was no political appetite for another intervention by first Britain and then America, influenced by widespread concerns in the UK over the heavy human and financial cost in Iraq and Afghanistan and the reduced state of our armed forces. That matters are worse there now as a result would seem highly likely. Only when the level of human suffering reached horrific proportions with ISIL's beheadings, mass enslavements, rapes and genocide, and with the evidence of our Western Islamic youth at risk of brainwashing, did the public support air intervention. It then became patently clear that the depredations of SDSR 10 had reduced the ground attack force too far and a Tornado squadron already in the process of disbanding had to be reprieved at the last minute.

Finally, and of even greater concern, we were caught off guard by resurgent Russia's invasion of Crimea and adventures in Eastern Ukraine. To top it all, presumably for the discomfiture of the UK, Russia has offered to lease 12 Fencer bombers to Argentina.

All this suggests that the document "*Securing Britain in an age of Uncertainty*" fell well short of its ambition. That the 'current NSS is no longer adequate for this changed world, nor is the Future Force Structure' is the judgment of the HCDC, and most independent analysts. As the HCDC reported in March this year:

"All the planning assumptions, embedded in the NSS and SDSR10 have been challenged by the re-emergence of a conventional threat from Russia and an ever-expanding list of fragile states, many dominated by terrorist affiliates."

The reality is that the SDSR counted on a relatively benign security environment for a decade. It was prepared to risk what history has shown timelessly, that events can greatly change the security situation overnight, and our ability to predict the future with any certainty is a chimera.

Not only did SDSR10 leave us unprepared for world events, it largely failed to anticipate evolving modes of warfare. Although the need to prepare for cyber attack was highlighted, the HCDC identified:

"... the failure of SDSR 10 to emphasise the conventional deterrent role of the Armed Forces."

Nowhere was this more evident than in the Ukraine where, lacking resolve and sufficient credible conventional deterrence, the West was effectively ignored and sidestepped by Russia, her military personnel deploying as pseudo-irregulars, or 'little green men' in a form of surrogate warfare now labelled 'hybrid'.

This is quite some list of weaknesses to be addressed if SDSR15 is to meet the 'fit for purpose' label.

The Changed Security Environment

ISIL has become a household name for its barbarity and has affected security world-wide. It has shown its ability both to establish and strengthen a 'Caliphate' in Syria/Iraq and simultaneously to spring surprises on the West. The slaughter of Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya, and tourists in Tunisia, exposes both its reach and the vulnerability of democratic states to this form of threat.

ISIL already controls an area larger than the United Kingdom, with the aspiration to unify the whole of Islam. Few people in the West appreciate its ideology and its uniqueness. Unlike Al Qaeda, whose principal aim was the removal of infidels from the Holy Places, ISIL seeks control of territory; its perverted interpretation of the Koran and the Hadiths is believed literally by its followers. No country can be recognised or become an ally; there can be no peace treaties and no borders because all must be enfolded into the Caliphate.

Many commentators believe that ISIL carries the seeds of its own destruction within it and thus can be contained. This is by no means certain, there is no sign of it yet and, in any case, containment would take time, requiring continuation of the current military strategy over a prolonged period to destroy this evil regime. At the same time, ISIL's extreme ideology must be challenged by reputable Islamic theologians and, though the West should tread carefully, by backing soft power tactics with clear and effective military power.

This summary of ISIL's nature may help us to understand the Prime Minister's statement that:

"ISIL poses an existential threat to the British way of life."

We should expect to see this re-affirmed in SDSR15, and need for military support for our diplomacy, and its use as a last resort, explained.

What then of Russia which, since early 2014, has gone from being a difficult but not impossible member of the Security Council to a ‘real and present danger to European security’? Her actions in the Crimea and Ukraine flout the UN charter and still represent a clear threat to both NATO and other former Soviet states with Russian diasporas. The Baltic members of NATO are particularly vulnerable in this respect. At the same time Russia has upgraded and re-equipped much of her nuclear arsenal, re-emphasised the use of tactical nuclear weapons, published a new assertive naval doctrine for the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, sent its submarines to patrol close to the Western littoral, and penetrated NATO airspace using heavy bombers, threatening our homelands and causing disruption to civil air traffic.

There are some who would claim that the West’s treatment of the previous superpower was both insensitive and provocative. The rapidity of the eastward expansion of the European Union and NATO, absorbing Russia’s previous ‘glacis’ states, together with political events in Ukraine, a country of profound importance to Russian history and security, might well be seen from Moscow as threatening, despite the fact that NATO is entirely a defensive alliance.

In a number of ways, this has played into the hands of the wily Mr Putin. Most commentators would view him as unreformed KGB, desirous of an autocratic state built on the communist past. His actions are calculated to appeal to his electorate and to raise his stature on the world stage. Despite lower oil prices he is still planning to spend over \$700bn on Defence in the next few years. He remains a popular figurehead in Russia, if polls are to be believed.

Western response to Putin’s actions has been mixed, with historical, religious and commercial interests at play. The presence of Western advisors in Ukraine and NATO forces in the Baltic has been positive, but much more may be required to convince Moscow of NATO’s united resolve. History has shown that whilst Russia despises weakness, strength is respected. The Defence Secretary has stated that:

“the conflict in Ukraine is ‘red hot’ and Russian-backed separatists could take more territory.”

Given the lack of NATO consensus, the SDSR must suggest how Britain should play its part both individually, perhaps in military training, and as a member of the Alliance.

NATO defence spending is dangerously unbalanced. European nations are not paying their share of collective defence; America provides 70% of the NATO budget and her interest in Europe is lessening as significant challenges in the Far East take precedence. Putin has got away with annexation of the Crimea, and a *de facto* occupation of Eastern Ukraine. Sanctions so far have not forced him to change his mind, and are being used to demonize the West.

SDSR15 must spell out the implications of all this for UK security and state clearly our wider obligations under Article 5 of the NATO charter. It must show how we can, with allies, acquire the conventional strength to deter further risky adventurism.

Then we must consider the evolving modes of warfare. While the West, especially the USA, maintains a predominance in conventional military capability, we must expect adversaries to search out our weaknesses choosing asymmetric, surrogate or hybrid options and employing such systems as micro weapons, drones and cyber warfare. Unquestionably, Western society is highly vulnerable to cyber attack; so too is much of the military and security apparatus. The question therefore is whether to treat

this threat as a game changer or, as we believe, one more important element in the range of capabilities an aggressor could deploy. More widely, we must consider whether we have sufficiently recognised and adapted to the opportunities of the digital age and equally its vulnerabilities.

There is much work to be done here, and we hope that the review will confirm that this is in hand and properly funded. A responsive specialised defence industry would be an important element in our construct. We should not forget that the threat from Electronic Warfare (EW), which formed an important part of the Cold War, induced both technological solutions and work rounds. Much effort was put into this but it was never at the expense of conventional kinetic capabilities. We should be careful that we do not fall into that trap today, especially when those nations most intent on developing strong cyber capabilities are also growing massive conventional forces. Retaining conventional critical mass remains essential.

Hybrid warfare, as employed by Russia so effectively in Eastern Ukraine, is a variation on an old theme; it thrives on minority grievances, perceived or real, and is aggravated by internal and external propaganda. Once under way it is very difficult to control. It is far better to anticipate where such situations might erupt and act, where possible with allies, to eliminate the sources of tension. A National Engagement strategy across many fields, and especially defence and security engagement, would have an important part to play in the spectrum of counters.

Finally, we cannot ignore the certainty that we will be surprised by events in a world increasingly complex and volatile, where the gap between rich and poor nations shows little sign of closing.

All of the above threats must be faced in SDSR15; they will to a greater or lesser degree affect our security both as a nation and as a member of NATO for the foreseeable future. A pragmatic assessment of our place in the world is the critical foundation.

Strategic Options

“The world is more dangerous and unstable than at any time since the end of the Cold War.”

So says the HCDC report of 17 March this year. If this is the case, and the evidence is surely overwhelming, then a budget-led approach to the SDSR is unacceptable and dangerous. The approach must be strategic and risk-based, and determine the military capabilities required to tackle both existing threats and those which may unpredictably arise in the unstable world in which we live.

The Conservative Party in its manifesto committed itself to maintaining Britain’s strong global role; it also committed to retaining the nuclear deterrent. The Defence Secretary has said that current events mean taking a long-term view of how to tackle the causes of instability, not just to treat the symptoms. We applaud this.

We should therefore expect SDSR15 to reinforce these statements underlined by a recognition of our dependence on a world-wide network of trade, finance and defence commitments that cannot be secured by an isolationist policy. At the heart of these ambitions lies engagement for long-term relationships, and the co-ordination across Government cited in SDSR 10 but still to be properly funded. This will need to be strongly led, and the obvious leader is the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. Yet the FCO, after years of cuts, is a shadow of its former self, and it, together with such vital tools as a full-range BBC World Service, must surely be resuscitated. This strategic engagement policy, benefitting not only global stability but trade, must be more than just words; it will require long term commitment to the use of full spectrum soft power.

Behind all of this will be the capability to project hard power at short notice, for whilst the soft power element in this approach must remain the preferred activity, its effectiveness will be immeasurably enhanced by the knowledge that hard power stands behind it. This appears to be the view of the Chief of the Defence Staff, as set out in his address at Chatham House on 15 September 2015.

For completeness, we hope to see a clear Defence Industrial policy and strategy emerge. For too long, lip service has been paid to this crucial matter. Can we access key requirements at need and replace equipment when (not if) it is lost in combat? Dare we rely on the capacity and willingness of other nations industry in times of war?

Lastly, SDSR15 must come clean on nuclear deterrent strategy. We should expect clarity on how the Trident replacement will be funded without damage to conventional capabilities. Nuclear deterrence is only credible if it is backed by adequate conventional forces. Without such forces, the nuclear threshold is dangerously lowered. A flexible response has been the basis for NATO's nuclear strategy for decades and must remain so in future.

Capabilities and Budgets

It is not appropriate for us to propose detailed force structures nor the weapons systems necessary to confront the challenges ahead. Yet there are certain characteristics that can be outlined and which a comprehensive SDSR15 should further illuminate.

The range of weaponry and styles of warfare are expanding; the shift of power away from the West to new and re-emerging powers, and to increasingly extreme ideologies, continues. This argues for high readiness, and adaptable armed forces, with weapons superior to those of potential adversaries. Moreover, there must be sufficient mass to both deter aggression and where necessary to engage and sustain hostilities. ISIL is likely to prove the need for such capabilities, and Russia may do so also.

We submit that if we now have the vision of long-term engagement within which the Armed Forces will play a key role, this is the stepping stone to a coherent SDSR. Bringing it all together may be a tall order, and it will not be easy to provide the necessary resources to meet all the challenges. We must hope for enlightenment in this review.

The good news is that Defence is now recognised as a special Government priority. However, guaranteeing at least 2% of national income will, if restricted to 2%, increase the funds available by very little over the next five years as other budgets are amalgamated into Defence to reach the NATO benchmark. It may help the planners with their tasks but it is hard to see that their problems have gone away as the specified increase in the equipment budget together with expected pay rises means that if Defence overall is to be increased at just 0.5% per annum, then all other elements of the Defence budget will have to be cut. Thus, exactly how the Chancellor's Red Book commitments will guarantee the 2% minimum remains to be seen. Perhaps they will not. Can we then take much comfort from his unequivocal statement that he is prepared to spend what it takes **“to deal with whatever the world throws at us”**?

We already know that the cost of the aircraft carriers is rising sharply as they approach service; we have yet to order convincing numbers of F-35Bs to fly from them; the funding for the replacement nuclear deterrent has yet to be found; and we lack any realistic Maritime Patrol Aircraft Capability for long-range search and rescue, detection of Russian submarines and for vital protection and support of our naval operations, especially our nuclear deterrent submarines. Meanwhile, our deep-strike Tornados

are due to be retired without effective and timely replacement, our surface and submarine fleet is pitifully small both to meet existing commitments and for the protection of our new carriers, and our army is the smallest since before the Napoleonic wars. There are justified concerns over numbers of RAF combat aircraft, and specialist manpower shortages in all the Armed Services have been identified. Greater use of reservists has been proposed as a way of ameliorating some manpower problems but the public will take some convincing that this can meet its (ambitious) targets given the considerable recruiting problems already encountered.

The SDSR of 2015 faces scrutiny from a range of parties who will be looking to see our national strategy clearly identified, the weaknesses exposed since 2010 addressed, and the range of threats responsibly confronted. The balance between hard and soft power to meet the Conservative manifesto commitment to maintaining Britain's global role requires particular scrutiny.

In this regard, we have drawn together a check list which we hope will help to decide whether SDSR 2015 is indeed 'fit for purpose' or yet another short-term fudge likely to fail when tested in a world which, as the HCDC has stated so clearly, "is more dangerous and unstable than at any time since the end of the cold war."

- **Has the SDSR realistically and honestly analysed the changes to the security environment since 2010 and the weaknesses exposed in our defence capabilities?**
- **Has it identified the range of threats to our security both as a nation and as NATO member?**
- **Has it set out a clear strategic vision to enhance our security both now and in the future?**
- **Does the strategy have a convincing foundation of hard and soft power for its implementation; and is it supported by co-ordinated Government departments (led by an adequately staffed and funded FCO) and by the Intelligence and Security Agencies?**
- **What are the implications for conventional forces of the replacement nuclear deterrent and has cyber warfare received balanced attention?**
- **Will our Armed Forces be sufficiently adaptable and ready for the unexpected?**
- **Are we able to ensure supply of our key equipment and support requirements at need?**
- **Has the budget adequately catered for the nation's defence and security needs now and for at least the next decade?**

ABOUT THE UKNDA

UKNDA's objectives are:

Promoting the effective and efficient Defence of the United Kingdom and the UK's worldwide interests;

Advancing public awareness and understanding of the history and role of the Armed Forces in the life of the Nation;

Commissioning research into the threats faced by the United Kingdom and the military capabilities required to meet these threats;

Seeking to inform debate on all aspects of National Defence and Security.



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