



UKNDA COMMENTARY

UK NATIONAL DEFENCE ASSOCIATION

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THE DANGERS OF DENIAL

“Denial is a psychological defence mechanism in which confrontation with a personal problem or with reality is avoided by denying the existence of the problem or reality.”

The death of one member of a long standing relationship is often made tolerable only if the past becomes the present and the future is ignored. A mother faced with evidence of drug abuse by a much loved child takes refuge in denial. It is a common occurrence in individuals under stress that they persuade themselves that the easy outcome is the logical one. This phenomenon is not absent in politics.

On a macro scale, denial of events such as the Holocaust is clearly absurd, but ethnic cleansing in many parts of the world, and genocide in Rwanda and in the Balkans, have all witnessed denial on a vast scale by Governments who prefer to look the other way. Closer to home, the true implications of the annexation of Crimea are conveniently ignored. Grand denial is particularly dangerous in the field of international relations, especially when dealing with very different cultures.

Denial in Defence

In the United Kingdom today we are seeing denial, not on these extreme scales of horror, but of a reality, the reality of the true state of our armed forces and the impact this is having on the UK's influence and future security in an increasingly perilous world.

This is not just a cry from the much-derided Armchair Generals, but the steady and progressively concerned evidence over a substantial period from respected commentators, security experts, and even experienced politicians, whose objectivity is not in doubt. Indeed, the House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC) has been consistently critical of the impact that Government policies have had on defence. Add to this the many comments by departing military personnel, and there is a clear case for recognition of the reality of British defence. The commentators are not just British: successive NATO Secretary Generals, American military and political leaders have all voiced similar concerns. What are they saying?

Almost unanimously, they are saying that the steady erosion of the UK's military capability is putting at risk our relationship with the United States, which is key to our security. At the same time this erosion is reducing our standing and authority amongst nations whose relationship with us is profoundly influenced by our military posture, its strength and expertise. They are, after all, only confirming what any person with experience in the geopolitical arena knows, that the United Kingdom's influence in the world has not been gained by economic performance or diplomatic skills alone, important though these are, but significantly by our military prowess which underpins the important contribution we make to international order.

We should remember the wise words of Sir Max Hastings in his 11th July 2011 lecture to the Centre for Policy Studies on ‘*Defending the Essential Relationship – Britain and the United States*’:

“In international relations, an ally is worth as much as, and no more than, the resources, and specifically military resources, it is capable of contributing towards implementing a shared purpose by force or threat of it.”

“The 4th Largest Defence Budget”?

The lame political response to all this concern, and indeed to the papers which we have published under the UKNDA banner over the last 18 months, is to assert time and again that we are spending the “4th largest amount on defence in the world”. However, the most reputable sources disagree. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and IQ Defence place us in 6th position. Both The Sun and The Times newspapers also disagree, placing us 5th. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) places us 5th as well. More worryingly, all also agree that on current plans, if nothing is done, we will soon fall still further.

One of our recent blows did seem to strike home. As reported by the BBC, our paper of September 2013, “*The Defence Budget League Tables*”, was deemed to be a slur on the armed forces of this country by suggesting that they were *inferior* to those of Argentina! In reality, however, we pointed out the unpalatable truth that our armed forces are actually *smaller*. As we shall show, denial is at the root of this response.

Let us examine the quote, “the 4th largest defence budget in the world”. If this statement is to have any utility then the desired implication must surely be that we have the 4th largest and/or most capable armed forces in the world?

Yet, as we showed in our *Defence Budget League Tables* paper, the most reputable statistics demonstrate inescapably that not only do we not have the 4th largest budget but that we are also a long way from having the 4th largest, or indeed most capable, armed forces. Personnel numbers (including reserves) placed us not in 4th position as we are invited to infer, but actually in 31st position behind both Spain and Argentina.

So if we cannot truthfully state we are 4th in personnel numbers; are we then 4th in equipment? But even here, our combat aircraft numbers are well below those of France (placed 5th by SIPRI) and Italy (in 11th), and our Principal Surface Combatant warships are also significantly fewer than those of France, and much the same as those of Italy despite its far fewer global commitments.

We are clear, and said so, that our servicemen are experienced, skilful, battle hardened, and merit deep respect. But the sad truth is the numbers are facts that cannot be denied; the latest Military Balance (2014) of IISS reconfirms everything we said in September last year. Of course our people are talented, very capable and amongst the best in the world, and some of our equipment is outstanding, though much is now very old. But numbers do matter in terms of combat power, and when these numbers are compared with those available to other nations, we simply cannot assure our public, our allies or even our potential enemies that we have the “4th most capable armed forces in the world”.

Moreover, as we have expressed time and again, even if it were true that we were spending the “4th largest amount on defence in the world” it is surely the output which matters, not the input. So, what do we get for it? There was no answer from government to our question “Why is it that in 2012, France spending some \$11bn less than us on defence and with comparable capabilities can field 24 Principal Surface Combatant warships (PSCs) and 15 Attack Squadrons to our 19 PSCs and 9 Squadrons?” (IISS Mil Balance 2013). This year’s figures (Mil Balance 2014) show the same disparity in capabilities but with a decrease in the UK budget and an increase in that of France. We still spend \$4.6bn more and with less to show for it.

Defence Procurement

We have always fully recognised – see our paper on “*The Unique Challenges of Defence Procurement*” of November 2013 – that the problems which face Defence Ministers are unlike those of any other department and are highly complex. But denial flourishes here too.

Is this because an admission that the defence budget pays indirectly for benefits in other parts of the public service would, if exposed, open a Pandora’s box of waste and questionable accounting practices? Or is it because it would raise the issue, as it should, of the absence of any Defence Industrial Strategy, it having been buried by the Labour Government and largely ignored by the Coalition.

Government will doubtless respond that the current somewhat opaque paper, of some 200 pages on the *Defence Growth Partnership*, is an excellent example of a defence industrial strategy. In reality it is aimed mainly at exports, not at ensuring the preservation of those sovereign capabilities required for our own defence. Nor does it properly recognise what everyone in defence exports knows, namely that the endorsement, by purchase and

usage by the UK Armed Forces, is the strongest and indeed essential advertisement for our defence industry. It also fails to recognise that equipment is lost in combat and, without a capable industrial infrastructure, we are unable to replace expended or lost equipments in any relevant timescale. In the field of defence industrial policy there is denial on a grand scale.

The Need for Objectivity

We have made pleas for an honest review of these issues. Our paper, “*Time for an Objective Defence Review*” of January 2014 states:

“... let the 2015 review be a genuine strategic review, unlike its predecessor. It should be unconstrained by a pre-determined figure for defence expenditure. National aspirations should be quantified. Let the weaknesses which the missing capabilities represent be carefully considered ... Proper consideration should also be given to the need for a defence industry strategy. We must decide where defence should lie in the nation’s priorities and then make the necessary choices.”

Surely in the light of the flawed Strategic Defence and Security Review (2010), we cannot carry out the next review other than honestly? And yet, despite the trenchant criticism from the HCDC and many others of both the 2010 Review and continuing defence cuts, denial is already creeping into the 2015 Review.

SDSR 2015

So where do we stand as we embark on SDSR 2015? Disappointingly, despite the concerns raised by our inability to influence events in Syria, and now the Ukraine, nothing much has changed.

The defence situation today is significantly worse than when we commented last year. The much needed Sentry Airborne Warning and Control Aircraft (AWACS) upgrade is still unfunded, and the aircraft’s serviceability remains a matter of great concern. This could prove of particular importance for the effectiveness of the RAF’s contribution to NATO’s surveillance of the Ukraine.

The RAF has also just lost another 2 of its 5 operational Tornado Sqns. Its remaining combat capability amounts to just 7 Squadrons. Add to these losses the well-known removal of Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) and the Harrier, and the outcome is a glaring loss of capability across the board. It is also unclear whether the recent contract to extend support to the remaining Tornado aircraft until 2019, will coalesce with the likely delivery dates of the F-35B STOVL aircraft. In any case, despite the obvious benefits of that aircraft’s stealth capability, we are unlikely to receive replacements on a one-for-one basis, further reducing combat force levels.

Shortage of aircraft and delays to the F-35B programme are likely also to impact on the Royal Navy’s aircraft complement for its Carriers and it may not be until late this decade, and perhaps into the next, that aircraft become available in sufficient number to provide a plausible carrier combat capability. The availability of sufficient personnel to man our carriers and future nuclear deterrent submarines is another looming problem, yet denial prevails.

For the Army the situation is no better. Force levels are being reduced from 102,000 to 82,000, with the balance planned to be made up by recruiting 30,000 part-time Reservists. Despite extensive advertising, Reserve recruitment has thus far fallen far short of that anticipated. Yet politicians still deny there is any problem. Moreover, as the economy picks up, and civilian employment levels rise, all experience suggests that recruiting for the Armed Forces and their Reserves will become more difficult. There is also the experience that it takes between 10 and 15 Reservists to guarantee the equivalent of a full time soldier. Even if 30,000 Reservists could be recruited they would provide only the equivalent of 2-3000 regulars. Does that offset the loss of 20,000 regulars? Is not denial flourishing here too?

More widely, there are a number of other significant shortfalls. Spares support for complex equipment is insufficient for peacetime let alone for operational expenditure. Weapons stocks are below acceptable levels. In the Libya operation, for example, stocks of dual-mode Brimstone weapons fell to fewer than 10. Across the board, we have gaps in many specific skills, with the RAF reporting a shortfall in several critical aircraft technician trades.

Against this background, repetition of the mantra that we spend “the 4th largest amount on defence in the world” can only be seen as unconvincing and disingenuous. This repetition may fool the public at large, but potential enemies are deterred by their perception of our real capability, not by budgetary figures.

Why is the Government in Denial?

Without doubt the Government consists of intelligent and patriotic men and women. Why then do they deny the nation's defence shortfalls? Is it the need to satisfy populist social demands or, even as we approach the centenary of WWI, is it an insufficient appreciation of the enormity of the geopolitical lessons of history? The Defence Secretary refutes what is so obvious, and states that he prefers to listen to his current advisors and not voices from the past. We do not know what his advisors are telling him, but if they are from the Treasury we can be fairly confident that their advice will be orientated towards very different priorities, fiscally short term, and little concerned with defence capability. If it is his Civil Servants that he listens to, is it the case, as has been leaked, that, like Saddam's advisors, they do not wish to give him bad news? Surely the Chiefs of Staff (COS) cannot be telling him that all is well, because reports which emerge, either leaked or stated openly by very recently retired seniors, make it very clear that this is not what they have been saying. The speech by the current Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) last December went as close as has been seen for quite some time to giving the game away. As always, CDS and the COS will make the best of a bad job, and they will carry out loyally the tasks they are given; but they are constrained by their position. Bizarrely, a whistle blower in the NHS or Education is now applauded by politicians, but in the Ministry of Defence it is very different. Denial is the default position required.

We all know this. Journalist Con Coughlin knows it. His article in the Telegraph of 31st March this year cites the former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, General Sir Richard Shirreff, expressing concern over the effect of the defence cuts to our armed services. Astoundingly, our politicians refuted his remarks, denying that he was qualified to make such statements!

Of course, our allies know it too. US Defense Secretary Gates and now his successor Chuck Hagel have all expressed their concerns. American Generals, such as Stanley McChrystal, echo these worries "... at a certain point you just find you're not consulted when important decisions are made" (Daily Telegraph Jan 2013). Surely, and perhaps more importantly, our potential opponents know it as well?

So why is the Prime Minister returning to this tired old cliché on defence expenditure? Who is advising him? Our allies can add up; they know that output is what matters and that 85% of the UK's front line air combat capability could be accommodated on just one USAF airbase, or on just one Nimitz Class carrier, and that we could sustain only 6 combat ships in theatre for an operation of more than six months and that for the same period the Army could sustain just one Brigade. Our potential enemies will quickly see through false claims. They must be amazed that this government seems to believe that these numbers actually give us credibility or authority.

Conclusion

The Government may have balanced the books but it has done so at the expense of our position in the world, our future influence and, worst of all, our long term security. Now, with America's 'pivot' to the Pacific, and in a world which is so obviously on a very dangerous trajectory, this security cannot be assured. Such denial is not just irresponsible, its legacy will expunge any recollection of financial rectitude when our political history is written.

As we approach SDSR 2015, let us stop pretending that major damage has not already been done to our force structures and capabilities. Let us show the world that we have a clear path to restore lost capabilities and to strengthen our force structures to the level necessary to justify our desire to remain a leading influential nation. And by doing so, let us restore some credibility to utterances by our politicians on defence. Above all, let us provide our nation with the necessary balance between our nuclear deterrent and our conventional capabilities such that together they will present a convincing deterrence to allies and enemies alike.

This paper was prepared by Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon, Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, Air Commodore Andrew Lambert, Allen Sykes and Antony Hichens, authors of papers referred to throughout this work.

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