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**REVIEW OF THE BRITISH DEFENCE:  
MEASURING ITS STRATEGIC  
AMBITION**

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### **Review of British Defence: measuring its strategic ambition**

#### *Abstract:*

*The politics of defence of the United Kingdom are compiled in the Security and Defense Strategic Review (SDSR) that, together with the Strategy of National Security (NSS), ought to be considered as one of the most important strategy documents that the British government has published. Periodically, both documents check the threats that the United Kingdom has to address, the capacities it needs to tackle these and the changes in the configuration of the structure of the Armed Forces to properly address these. British defence policy is currently under review and the definitive results have not been released yet. However there are enough indications about where the new approaches. It seems clear that the economic situation evolution and the armed forces' capabilities play a relevant role in future conflicts. Also, they will be the key elements when defining the British determination in order to satisfy its strategic ambitions and fulfill its defense policy.*

**Keywords:** Defense Policy, Strategic Review, Security, Armed Forces, Level of Ambition.

## The United Kingdom Defence Policy

The defence policy of the United Kingdom has always been determined by the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) that, together with the National Security Strategy (NSS), must be considered two of the most important documents about strategy published by the British government. Both periodically examine the threats the United Kingdom has to face, the abilities needed to respond to these threats and, consequently, the changes in the Armed Forces structure configuration in order to respond to these challenges. Following a coherent strategic logic, the NSS analyses the security environment and sets strategic goals, while the SDSR determines the ways to accomplish these objectives and the means required to do it, that is to say, the resources that will be used. Both documents are part of a broad national security review package, which also includes an annual report aimed at the Parliamentary Commission of Defence on the implementation of the NSS and an open and biennially revisable national record of the risks<sup>1</sup>.

The last SDSR was published on 19th October 2010, one day after the release of the NSS, with the commitment to revise it after five years. Thus, the United Kingdom compares itself to the US model, based on the “Quadrennial Defense Reviews” (QDR), a methodology that has been applied for more than two decades. This means that in 2015 the British defence policy has been revised and, although we do not have the final results, it is not clear what the outcomes of these new approaches will be. The main problem of the 2010 SDSR, which is still in force, is that it maintains the same premise as the previous one<sup>2</sup> since it claims that the probability of an outbreak of an international conflict remains very low after the Cold War. So, supplying the necessary capabilities to confront a militarily developed country is an unlikely scenario and not a priority any longer.

The second premise introduced by this strategy defined the “fragile” countries’ crisis as the major risk to UK security during the first decades of the XXI century. According to this restrictive vision, opponents will most probably be insurgent groups or lightly armed terrorists who should be fought with long expensive stabilization operations. The SDSR identified terrorism and cyber-threats as key areas when deciding on investments in security<sup>3</sup>.

The underlying premise of the 2010 review, which was not framed explicitly, was that the UK anticipated security and humanitarian crisis to be sufficiently

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<sup>1</sup> HM Government, *A strong Britain in an age of uncertainty: the National Security Strategy*, Cm 7953, London: TSO, Oct. 2010, pp. 11, 25–6.

<sup>2</sup>The previous one dates from 1998.

<sup>3</sup>Defence Secretary Michael Fallon discusses the need for a full and thorough SDSR”, MOD News Team, 15 June 2015— Ministerial comment, <https://modmedia.blog.gov.uk/2015/06/15/defence-secretary-michael-fallon-discusses-the-need-for-a-full-and-thorough-sdsr/>.

rare, as well as limited as to enable the British Armed Forces to prevent them or to tackle them if it should come to that. In fact, Britain never involved more than 10 % of its troops in the most demanding operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (10 000 soldiers out of 100 000)<sup>4</sup>. Although other countries might regard this effort as huge, it was scarce compared to previous levels of involvement of the British government. The Future Force 2020<sup>5</sup>, which considered the review, established that the UK can only deal with one security problem—*Major Operation*—at a time.

Thus, the level of ambition established was based on deploying a maximum of 6 600 soldiers during a decade in one stabilization operation and in a sole country, supported by minor temporary efforts that, under no circumstances, should exceed 3 000 soldiers. In the context of budgetary restrictions, it was possible to reduce progressively the cost of force projection operations by 19 % in 2015 in comparison with 2010 levels. Nevertheless, in 2010 the UK exceeded its scope of ambition in its ability to lead operations for that year — known as Defence Planning Assumptions. This meant an extraordinary effort for the British Armed Forces, causing problems that still persist to this day<sup>6</sup>.

The SDSR 2010 also highlighted the importance of operating within the framework of coalitions with other countries, mainly with the US, although it acknowledged that the most important contribution the UK could make when working in coalition or “partnership” was in retaining a wide range of capabilities. In other words, the UK refused to specialize in certain capabilities or in certain operational specialities, which had to be strengthened if insufficient, by those provided by allies. By contrast, the UK would seek to maintain all the capabilities of a militarily developed power, including those it considered obsolete such as tanks, state-of-the-art war aircraft, submarines, nuclear weapons and aircraft carriers<sup>7</sup>, albeit at reduced numbers.

Finally, in a statement that seemed more wishful thinking than realistic, it assumed that rather than focusing on a particular region of the world (as for instance, Europe or the Middle East) its commitment was global, reaching the Pacific region to the sub-Saharan Africa. However, the SDSR 2010 could not foresee a series of crisis and events that would define the current strategic landscape. The most obvious ones were the following: the involvement of the UK in actions that took place in Libya in 2011, the instability in Ukraine in 2014, European economic weakness and the resulting downward pressure on defence spending –brought forward by many NATO partners–, the emergence

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<sup>4</sup> House of Commons, Defence Committee, “Re-thinking defence to meet new threats”, Tenth Report of Session, 2014–15.<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmdfence/512/512.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Composed of Deployable Forces, High Readiness Forces and Lower Readiness Forces.

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons, Defence Committee, “Re-thinking defence to meet new threats”, Tenth Report of Session, 2014–15.<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmdfence/512/512.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

of a new way of extremist Islamism in Syria and Iraq, or an Ebola epidemic outbreak in West Africa. Given the British reevaluation of its strategic approaches these events themselves were not necessarily the most important aspect, but rather the trends they represented.

Firstly, the premise that campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan should be followed by a period of “strategic pause”, during which Future Force 2000 could be deployed, was incorrect ever since the UK got involved in military actions in Libya, West Africa and the Middle East. Secondly, the premise that Europe was immune to cross-border state violence is also not correct. By contrast, some powerful countries in the region did not refuse to use force as an essential tool of their international policy. Finally, the significance of the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria which, with its brutal combination of terrorism and uprising, is aiming for territorial occupation not to establish a structured state, recognized by the international legal system, but to found a caliphate that challenges the existing Westphalian model<sup>8</sup>.

Nevertheless, the main problem of the SDSR 2010 was not entirely related to the examination of the security environment (certainly limited) but to the fact that it arose in the context of a severe economic and financial crisis, which leads to substantial cutbacks in public spending, and ultimately in defence. Defence commitments inherited from previous administrations were considered unaffordable when tackling public deficit reduction, as well as when financing the respective equipment programmes<sup>9</sup>.

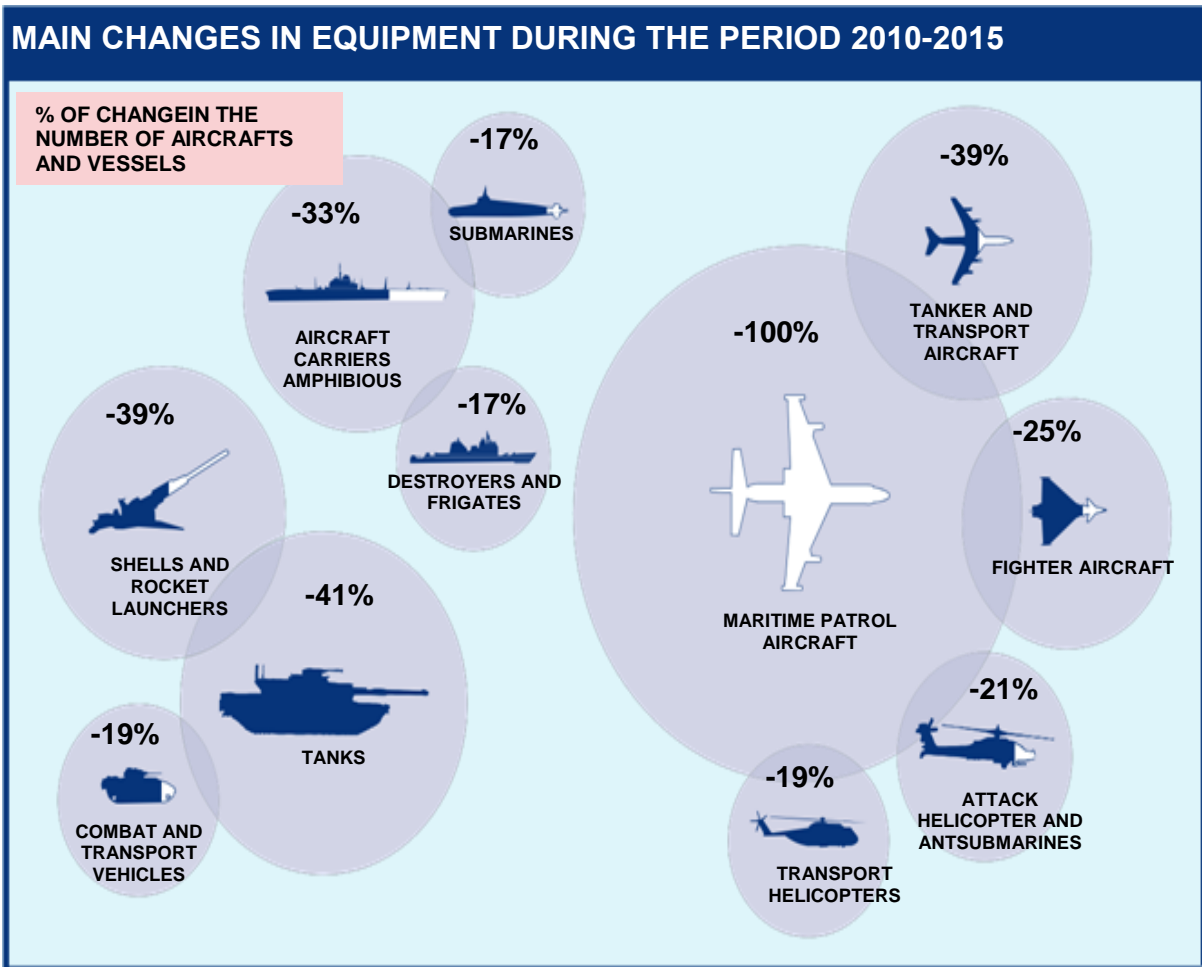
The consequence was a substantial cut to the defence budget, which in 2015 stood at 8 %. This reduction precipitated important changes in the Armed Forces configuration and equipment. Main cutbacks in essential capabilities, such as the aircraft on board after the withdrawal of the Harrier Jets and the HMS Ark Royal aircraft carriers (a mythical name at the service of the British Army since the years of the Spanish Armada), as well as the delay in the construction of two new aircraft carriers. This was a consequence, among other things, of the difficulties in placing the new fighter aircraft F-35 on board, reflecting the problems the UL was facing when trying to obtain military capabilities, according to the level of the ambition set in the defence review. The elimination of programmes considered a priority, such as the Nimrod MRA4 of aerial reconnaissance and the reduction of the surface fleet from 23 to 19

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Cornish and Andrew M. Dorman, “Complex security and strategic latency: the UK Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015”, International Affairs © 2015 The Royal Institute of International Affairs, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/INTA91\\_2\\_09\\_Cornish\\_Dorman.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/INTA91_2_09_Cornish_Dorman.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

frigates and destroyers were common in this context. In general, all the basic capabilities were cut back by approximately 30 %<sup>10</sup>.



<sup>10</sup> UK defence review: a test of strategic ambitions, Strategic Comments, 21:4, i-iii, 2015. <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/13567888.2015.1067005>.

However, possibly the most critical reduction was the one in active duty staff since it was expected to cut by 17 000 the number of army and navy (10 000 of the army and 5 000 navy and air force)<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, the armed forces were reduced to a strength that had not been seen since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>. The decrease in active duty military personnel had to be balanced with reserve soldiers whose number was expected to have reached 35 000 in total by 2018. The effectiveness of this part-time force was doubtful in terms of knowledge and capability when compared to the fired personnel.

What at first was conceived of as an exceptional opportunity for defence priorities and commitments, as well as balanced spending ended up with structural changes that were seriously criticised. These criticisms were focused primarily on two issues:

- SDSR took decisions based on budgetary considerations instead of carrying out a strategic examination of the resources the Armed Forces needed given the security environment.
- Reduction in staff and cuts in equipment jeopardised the British Armed Forces' capability to fulfil its missions, especially the most demanding ones.

The decision to reduce the high budget deficit saw a decrease in military capability in the UK, as the conventional combat capabilities of the armed forces and the level of the preparation of the troops was reduced. In a strategic context that was complicated by problems, such as the annexation of Crimea by Russia or the negative effects of the Arab Spring, the United Kingdom diminished the profile of its foreign and security policy, showing certain level of strategic exhaustion. The substantial reduction of its Armed Forces cast doubts on the UK' ability to provide the same sustained level of compromise in any future military operation that it did in Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

It is not a surprise that criticisms of this defence review were immediate. This criticism continues so that in March 2015 the Defence Committee of the House of Commons issued three reports severely criticising the way military operations were planned and decisions on the purchase of armament and equipment were made<sup>13</sup>. As an example of how seriously defence matters are addressed, one of the reports stated vigorously that “acquiring second aircraft carrier for the Army

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<sup>11</sup> See table 4 in Defence Personnel Statistics, SN02183, for historical comparisons. The Army says its total size, including 30,000 Reserves, will be 112,000 by 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Louisa Brooke-Holland, “The 2015 SDSR: a primer”, Briefing Paper Number 07235, 22 July 2015. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7235/CBP-7235.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor, “UK defence policy heading for chaos”, The Guardian, 26 March 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/news/defence-and-security-blog/2015/mar/26/uk-defence-policy-heading-for-chaos>.



(The Wales Prince) was nonsense” unless enough money was found to purchase aircrafts and protection vessels needed to accompany it<sup>14</sup>.

Given this less than satisfactory situation, the newly elected (on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 2015) government implemented a new SDSR. Although this has not succeeded yet, the new review expected to have a wider approach on the security issue including not only the defence policy and the Armed Forces capability, but also a broader vision of security that takes into account questions like domestic defence, counter-terrorism, cyber-security, border security and the development of international defence<sup>15</sup>.

The outlook of security that considers rebuilding the Armed Forces for the new post-Afghanistan period is then reinforced to enable simultaneous stability operations in up to twelve places where conventional and non-conventional threats must be faced. In any case, the UK must be pragmatic and recognise that since no other country is able to tackle those threats alone, its first mission should focus on working with big coalitions or alliances, mainly with the United States and NATO.

The Russian intervention in Ukraine will make the main conceptual difference between the current review and the previous one, SDSR 2010, as happened in countries like Germany and, to a lesser extent, France. Nowadays the UK appears ready to use its leadership of NATO to make sure that the Alliance has the whole range of conventional forces needed to defend Europe against a classic threat, such as Russia. In this sense, the United Kingdom plans to recover its conventional capabilities, eroded since the end of the Cold War, and to update them for new contingencies. Doing this requires paying closer attention to issues related to Marine Surveillance, the preparation for the NRBQ war, the development of a defence capability against ballistic missiles and the reinforcement of combat and manoeuvre capabilities in the three forces. It is a matter of demonstrating that the British Armed Forces have plausible conventional and nuclear capabilities to deter new threats, especially in Europe.

At the same time, the new SDSR aims to develop capabilities that can respond to asymmetric threats and those defined as “new generation” or “ambiguous” threats like cyber-attacks, information operations and the use of special forces to encourage subversion. In conclusion, the objective is to respond to what is considered the new Russian threats in hybrid operational environments, avoiding the repetition of events like those that took place in Ukraine.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> House of Commons, Defence Committee, Op. cit.

The UK wants to develop a response capability to a wide range of challenges and risks that can arise outside Europe such as terrorism, criminal regimes, extremist groups who control vast territories (ex. Daesh/IS), civil wars and other collapsed or weak states.

This high number of potential risks and threats that can simultaneously arise lead to the rejection of intensive stabilization operations in terms of human resources and materials, like the ones carried out in Iraq or Afghanistan as models for future interventions. Now cases such as those in Bosnia and Sierra Leone are considered successful models to be repeated in the future while studying the need for developing a force's capabilities structure fit to meet the requirements in more complicated situations like those in Libya, Syria or Ukraine.

The objectives and figures of the plan to replace active personnel with reserve workers are being discussed. The same situation is observed with the continuance and replacement of the active personnel, who resign from their position in the Armed Forces due to their age or other reasons<sup>16</sup>. In addition, the difficulty of controlling maintenance expenses and the modernization of nuclear equipment has also been taken into account. The SRHR 2010 left out the Trident ballistic missile<sup>17</sup> system considered the ultimate strategic weapon in the UK, although it accounts for 25% of the military budget<sup>18</sup> for acquisitions for at least the next decade. This, in addition to the large sum required to purchase two aircraft carriers, suggests that inevitably there will be cuts in other sectors, questioning the UK's ability to satisfactorily face risks and threats described in its next SDSR.

The British government indicated that 2 % of GDP will be allocated to defence. This will be a key indicator of the extent to which the government is willing to fulfil its series of commitments to update its defence capability. The UK seems to assume that this percentage is the minimum threshold that the NATO countries must contribute to maintain the credibility of the alliance and the American commitment to European security. Nevertheless, the problem of defence budget in the United Kingdom is that, as it happens with most European countries, public spending in education, health and retirement pensions is "guaranteed" against any reduction. As a result, these areas

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<sup>16</sup> General Sir Nicholas Carter, the Chief of the General Staff, said the Army is going to be significantly challenged in recruiting over the next three to five years. British Army Review, Spring/Summer 2015, p8.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor, Op.cit.

<sup>18</sup> 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-nucleararsenal-commons-debate>.



consume most of the budget so, in challenging economic situations, defence budget is especially vulnerable<sup>19</sup>.

However, electoral commitments of the party in office focused on reinforcing defence policy seem to show the policy of reducing cuts and that a coherent defence policy cannot be designed thinking in the short term, nor reduced to a simple dispute over whether to prioritize the maritime strategy, combat expeditionary, or the air force. That is the reason why these commitments include an increase in budget for the acquisition of new equipment spending up 1% in real terms each year from 2016 onwards. This will make possible the purchase of new *Astute* submarines, some last generation F-35 aircraft, new *Type-26* frigates and *Scout* armoured vehicles.

The problem is that carrying out these promises requires that military wage expenditure to remain “frozen”, a situation that has continued since 2010 as a part of the fiscal consolidation of the public sector undertaken by the British government at that time. It is very likely that salaries will have to be increased to place them on the same level as equivalent ones in the private sector, a situation in which the UK does not differ a lot compared to its European neighbours.

These circumstances can lead us to think that it is very likely that a 2% rise in defence spending may not be enough to cover all future defence needs costs, including the restructure of the Future Force 2020, what will force the UK to make hard decisions regarding the use of limited resources.

In an economic context marked by the current account deficit and the increase in public debt<sup>20</sup>, the evolution of the economic situation, along with the British government will to play an important role in future conflicts, this will define British determination to carry through with its defence policy and to fulfil its strategic ambitions.

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<sup>19</sup> Adrian Johnson, Malcolm Chalmers and Saeqeb 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>.

<sup>20</sup> “The tax free recovery”, *The Economist*, 20 September. 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21618820-why-britains-economic-recovery-has-not-yet-filled-its-coffers-tax-free-recovery>.