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## THE STRATEGIC DEFENCE REVIEW – REARGUARD ACTIONS AND MISSING THE POINT

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*How does the recent Strategic Defence and Security Review measure up to Britain's potential role in furthering the concept of sustainable security?*

### The Review in Context

Britain's new Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) was published in mid-October – the first defence review since 1998. The priorities in the SDSR were supposed to be set by the revised National Security Strategy, which was released the day before. While the Strategy defined the main four threats to UK security (known as “Tier One Threats”) as being terrorism, cyber-attack, natural disasters (such as pandemics), only the fourth threat, involvement in interstate conflicts elsewhere in the world relates much to Britain's traditional defence commitments. Even then the matter of involvement in international conflicts would be determined by political calculations.

The SDSR was produced in just four months in the context of a very early decision by the coalition government to engage immediately in a major review. The basis for this was earlier discussed in the May 2010 Briefing which stated that:

“The incoming Conservative-Liberal-Democrat coalition government believes that a *Strategic Defence Review* is urgently required for a number of reasons, including:

- the inability of the UK Ministry of Defence to maintain current commitments and programmes on present-day funding levels;
- the high cost of existing and future programmes;
- the recent experience of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and how far the methods that have been employed, have achieved their goals; and
- serious constraints on UK public spending that are likely to persist for up to a decade.

The new government has also set up a cross-departmental National Security Council that will further develop the trend to a national security strategy first established by the Labour government. While this is a welcome move, it comes in the context of recent programme decisions made ahead of the review that, if not reversed, will direct the defence posture in such a narrow manner that a wider and much-needed reappraisal of Britain's security will prove impossible. Instead, questions need to be asked about what is needed to limit conflict and create a more peaceful environment in an era of new global security challenges.

The two most significant programmes are:

- The aircraft carrier/F-35 strike aircraft programme
- Like-for-like replacement of the Trident nuclear system

These are very substantial in terms of costs, but their greater importance is in the manner in which they will dictate a particular role for the UK defence posture - what is in effect a scaled down version of the much larger US global power projection capability. **Essentially, they will determine a role for Britain in international security which is out of date and more related to the Cold War, bearing little relation to**

**the issues of global insecurity and conflict, which will be dominant in the next two to three decades.”**

This further Briefing follows on directly from the earlier analysis published in May and explores the extent to which the Review does actually address the most appropriate role for Britain in global security in the coming decades. The Review was drawn up in the context of a planned 8 % cut in the military budget as part of the coalition government’s Comprehensive Spending Review. Furthermore, this cut was in addition to a widely recognised financial over-commitment by the Ministry of Defence. Various estimates in the past two years put this as equivalent to at least 10% of the current budget, and possibly more. Overall, it is sensible to conclude that the UK military budget will be forced to shrink by at least one fifth over the next four years.

Oxford Research Group has argued repeatedly that UK security policy should be formulated in relation to the major global trends of the coming decades, especially socio-economic divisions and marginalisation, resource conflicts and other environmental constraints, most notably climate change. Leaving to one side for the moment the desirability of such an approach, the current reality is that the UK defence posture embraces a range of capabilities that hark back more to the age of empire than to a realistic appreciation of Britain’s current economic power or its place in the world. So wide is the range of capabilities and so extreme are the financial constraints that the SDSR ended up trying to make cuts across the board rather than consider a fundamental re-think of policy more appropriate to changing global circumstances. Thus, all three branches of the armed forces will face personnel and budgetary cuts, with decreases in the RAF’s fast jet fleet, cutbacks in front-line troop dispositions, and a reduction in the numbers of the Navy’s escorts (destroyers and frigates) and amphibious warships.

### **Trident Replacement**

At the same time, there were significant decisions made on the two main programmes discussed in ORG’s May briefing – Trident replacement and the new carriers - and while these may be due to severe funding limitations, they might well provide scope for a more fundamental review of the UK defence posture in the coming years. The decision on the replacement of the Trident nuclear submarine force will now be delayed until after the next General Election. This will save some money but, in order to maintain the submarine-building capability at the dockyards in Barrow in Furness, an additional *Astute*-class nuclear attack submarine will be constructed at a cost of around £1 billion. Furthermore, the comprehensive upgrade of the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) at Aldermaston will continue, the total annual cost of the AWE being around £1 billion. Even so, the heavy investment in design and early phases of construction of four ballistic missile submarines will be postponed.

Perhaps more significantly, the decision to delay Trident replacement does make it far more likely that a proper debate on the rationale for the UK nuclear weapons posture is possible. The recent establishment of the [Top Level Group](#) of current and former parliamentarians and senior military is one example of the manner in which UK nuclear weapons are becoming subject to debate within mainstream politics. Other extensive work is being undertaken by [BASIC](#), the British American Security Information Council, the [Acronym Institute](#), [Nick Ritchie at Bradford University](#) and others.

### **The Carriers**

Immediately before the 1982 Falklands War, the Thatcher Government was planning major defence cuts that would greatly limit the Navy’s aircraft carrier capabilities. As it happened, one of the 1950s generation carriers, *Hermes*, and one of the new small carriers *Invincible*, played a central war in that conflict and, as a result, all three of the *Invincible*-class ships were eventually deployed. *Invincible* went into reserve some years ago but *Illustrious* and *Ark Royal* were retained with their small force of Harrier jump-jets. In the 1990s, the Navy argued for the construction of two very large aircraft carriers to replace these two ships. The new ships, *Queen Elizabeth* and *Prince of Wales*, would be three times the size of

the *Invincible*-class, would be the largest warships ever to be deployed by the UK and would deploy the formidably expensive F-35 strike aircraft purchased from the United States. They would be the only ships in any navy anywhere in the world to come close to matching the even larger *Nimitz*-class carriers of the US Navy and would give the UK a global power-projection capability that it had not had since the days of the fleet carriers such as *Eagle* and an earlier *Ark Royal*, back in the 1950s and 1960s.

The decision to build the new carriers was agreed and work started early last decade, even though there were strong arguments that they demonstrated pretensions to be a world power that were out of step with Britain's actual status and would, moreover, warp the defence posture in one narrow direction. By early 2010, with major cuts in public spending inevitable, it seemed more than likely that the carrier programme would be subject to review. This is what has now happened with the publication of the SDSR, but the path chosen has been highly unusual. Essentially, it has been argued that to cancel one carrier would be so expensive that it makes sense to build both, but only one will be equipped with a small number of the F-35s in a somewhat cheaper variant to that originally planned. The other carrier, to be launched first, may function as a helicopter platform but would then go into reserve on completion of the second ship. In other words, a very large and expensive carrier would be built but would never be deployed with strike aircraft. Furthermore, the existing force of Harrier jump-jets will be withdrawn from service and *Ark Royal* will be scrapped. As a result, there will be a gap of around ten years when the Royal Navy will not have any aircraft carriers with embarked strike aircraft.

This is what is stated officially, but many analysts believe that the decisions taken in the SDSR will set the scene for the abandonment of the whole programme. Instead, one of the two carriers will be sold off – most likely to India because of its concern about the growing power of the Chinese Navy – and the second will be converted into a large helicopter carrier equipped to transport amphibious forces. Even that could be sold off in due course. Given this possibility, it is not surprising that there has been a very forceful response from senior figures linked to the Royal Navy. This has included a letter to the *Times*, from two former First Sea Lords and others, pointing out that following this decision, the UK would not be able to engage in a Falklands-type conflict. The letter even linked the current decision to a lack of preparedness in the mid-1930s to deal with the rise of Hitler.

This kind of reaction is indicative of the ferment of debate behind the scenes, but it is difficult for supporters of the idea of a globally-significant Britain with strong all-round armed forces to argue their case because the government conducting these cuts is dominated by the Conservative Party. By one of those ironies of British politics it was a Labour Government that decided to build the two new aircraft carriers, thereby giving the UK an expanded global maritime reach, and a Conservative Government that has essentially reversed that decision.

### Implications for British Security Policy

It is therefore appropriate to view the SDSR as having performed two functions. One is to scale down the UK armed forces overall, which was to be expected given current financial circumstances, but the other is to take two decisions – postponement of Trident replacement and withdrawing carrier-based aircraft – with considerable long-term implications. These latter decisions could pave the way for some serious re-thinking of the UK military posture, allowing space to advocate a posture much more attuned to global trends over the next thirty years.

Oxford Research Group's work on sustainable security sees the prospect of an economically divided and environmentally constrained world as being the real context for developing a security posture for the UK. It argues that aiding the transition to an ultra-low carbon and emancipated economic system should be at the heart of a sustainable security outlook, with the traditional role of armed forces greatly diminished. Prior to the current Review, Britain was intent on a very traditional approach – seeking to maintain a global role through its nuclear force and its power projection capabilities. The Review has

raised questions over the former and has hugely constrained the latter. This gives the opportunity for organisations such as ORG to open up a much wider debate on the UK security posture, advocating a stance that would be much more appropriate for the coming decades.

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