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Conservative Defence Policy: Five Knowns and Ten Unknowns

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Summary

Two months on from its surprise electoral victory, the Conservative Party government has provided a good deal of clarity about its defence policy and proposed military expenditure, procurement, deployments and future engagements. Yet, already over a month into the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR, as UK defence white papers are now termed), there is still much that we don't know about the planned course of British military policy. This briefing sets out five things that we now know about the SDSR and ten things we do not yet know.

1. The SDSR is already under way

Secretary of State for Defence Michael Fallon formally announced that the SDSR had begun in early June. This was not unexpected given that a new defence policy review process is now standard following a general election. With the five-year term of parliament fixed by law in 2011, SDSRs are now assumed to be five-year defence strategies rather than ad hoc policy updates.

What we don't yet know...

What is the process and timescale for the SDSR?

Beyond that it is under way and is due to conclude before the end of 2015, little else has been disclosed about the SDSR process or its timescale. In the run up to the general election, the House of Commons Defence Committee did sterling work in interrogating the Coalition government on its plans for the review and in soliciting a wide array of inputs from experts and civil society on important issues ranging from intervention norms to force structure to the crises in Iraq and Syria. This was particularly important because the first SDSR, following the May 2010 election, was widely seen to be rushed and unsatisfactory as the Coalition government looked to shed costs.

Who will the SDSR team consult with?

Five years later, the 2015 SDSR is not looking very much better. While there is clearly not the same urgency to fix capabilities to spending cuts, the clear review process with input from experts outside of the MoD has not emerged. According to Mr Fallon, responding to a parliamentary question on the SDSR's consultation plans last week, "The Government is engaging with a range of audiences, including non-governmental organisations." No more specifics than that.

How will the SDSR link to the National Security Strategy?

The really key question remains how the SDSR timetable sits with the review of the National Security Strategy (NSS) that is also now a post-election fixture. Again, little information has been released about the process and timescale despite the requests of the parliamentary Joint Committee on the NSS. In theory, the security threats identified in the NSS and its risk register inform the responses prioritised in the SDSR. In practice, the 2010 reviews were published almost simultaneously and the SDSR did not obviously respond to threats identified in the NSS. Despite the recommendations of the Joint Committee, this scheduling looks likely to be repeated and it remains unclear to what extent the SDSR will be nested in the findings of the updated NSS.

2. The UK will spend 2% of GDP on its military until at least 2020

In a surprise announcement, Chancellor George Osborne announced in his July 2015 Summer Budget Statement that the Government would commit at least 2% of GDP (a measure of annual national economic output) to financing defence over the full course of the 2015-2020 parliament. This was significant partly because of the intense public lobbying that the government faced from senior officials in the US and NATO for British defence spending not to slip below this symbolic minimum financing level for NATO member states.

Coming ahead of the defence and security reviews, this spending commitment is primarily a political message – of reassurance to the US, and of resolve to an assertive Russia. It says nothing about why the government might think 2% of GDP (about £35 billion in 2015, rising to over £39 billion in 2020 at constant prices according to official growth predictions) is a reflection of the security challenges to the UK nor why the armed forces are the appropriate means of response to these challenges. Despite the target, the NATO average (mean) is actually about 1.4% of GDP.

The 2% announcement was also significant because it had been expected that the SDSR would to some extent be dependent on the findings of the post-election Comprehensive Spending Review, which might force further cuts in the armed forces in the context of fiscal austerity. The 2% commitment is a relief to many in the Ministry of Defence and takes some of the pressure off those running the SDSR.

What we don't yet know...

What is included in the 2% 'defence' spending commitment?

There are three big unknowns in response to the new 2% commitment. First, it is not clear what the government intends to include within this 'defence' spending envelope. NATO will make its own assessment of what it accepts as defence spending but it is possible that the Chancellor plans to include some or all of UK intelligence spending, support for peacekeeping operations or military pensions in the total. Such bolstering looks unlikely, even though the government is greatly increasing its combined (and secret) allocation to military and civilian intelligence agencies.

Is 2% of GDP sufficient to fund ambitious procurement and personnel targets?

Secondly, even with the higher-than-expected spending commitment, it is not at all certain that the government can finance its very ambitious procurement plans (£163 billion to 2024) and keep its manifesto commitment to preserve the armed forces at their current size. The Coalition government made important progress in constraining MoD procurement practices and cost over-runs but the current focus of resources on procurement of some relatively unknown systems, especially the next generation Trident submarine and missile system and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, makes the prospect of cost over-runs very likely. This, in turn, would put pressure on personnel strength.

Why was the 2% commitment not in the Conservative manifesto?

Thirdly, there is the question of why the 2% commitment did not appear in the conservative electoral manifesto, as the £160+ billion procurement plan did. During the campaign, Conservative ministers (and their equivalents in Labour and Lib Dems) repeatedly refused to be drawn on meeting the 2% commitment. As the BBC's defence editor Mark Urban put it, during an election "even a party that historically has prided itself as strong on defence feels unable to make the argument for spending more on it." This surely says something interesting about the sceptical public mood on defence spending even in the context of renewed crises in the Middle East, Mediterranean and Ukraine.

3. The Government will renew Trident from 2016

The Conservative Party made a clear commitment to renew the UK's Trident submarine-launched nuclear weapons system in its 2015 manifesto. Unlike the other major parties, it was also unequivocal that it favoured like-for-like procurement of a four vessel "continuous at sea deterrence" capability. Estimated procurement costs for such a system are already built into the £163 billion procurement plan, although there is little consensus on how much such a massive undertaking will really cost to build, maintain and operate.

Less clear is whether the future of Trident will be looked at seriously within the SDRS process. Most likely it will be treated as a given, even though the 'Main Gate' decision to proceed with procurement will be taken via a parliamentary vote in 2016. The Coalition government already considered and rejected alternatives to Trident replacement in 2013, and the Conservative government is unlikely to feel the need to replicate this. Even if a number of Conservative backbenchers revolted on the Main Gate vote, the government could likely retain a majority through the support of Unionist parties and at least some MPs from the opposition.

What we don't yet know...

How will the SNP respond?

The bigger question is not whether government or parliament will support Trident renewal, but how the Scottish National Party (SNP) will react. The Achilles' heel of the submarine-based Trident system is its dependence on shore facilities at Faslane and Coulport on the west coast of Scotland. The SNP is now the third party in Westminster with 50% of Scottish votes, 56 of 59 MPs from Scotland and a solid majority in the Scottish Parliament. It is the largest pro-nuclear disarmament party in the UK parliament since the 1980s.

Neither the SNP nor the Scottish Government has a mandate or veto over UK defence facilities in Scotland. However, the SNP is likely to claim a moral authority from its Scottish majority and to make political capital out of the nuclear issue, especially ahead of the May 2016 Scottish elections. Ways that this could be manifested include disruption or failure to maintain basic services to the naval bases, lobbying for the Scottish government to gain powers over military bases, or even pressure for a new referendum on independence. While the Trident system could be relocated elsewhere in Britain – west Wales, southern Cornwall or Plymouth – the cost and disruption would be enormous. Due to be in service until the 2060s, Trident II depends on a stable home base for the next half-century.

The SNP is still very much testing the waters on defence and foreign affairs but it now has the strength to ask awkward questions in Commons committees as well as Parliament. It may look to trade guarantees of orders for Royal Navy shipbuilding for yards in Rosyth and on the Clyde for acquiescence on Trident but neither this nor Scotland's long-term place in the UK can be taken for granted.

4. The government would like to expand current and new military operations

The withdrawal from major operations in Afghanistan at the end of 2014 did not mean the return of the British armed forces to a peacetime footing. Since September last year, the RAF has been involved in a new phase of war in Iraq, where it is bombing Islamic State positions.

Ahead of the general election, the government was keen to avoid British "boots on the ground", and the risk of capture or casualties, in Iraq. Since June it has increased the number of British Army personnel in Iraq to 275, including training personnel outside of Iraqi Kurdistan. There are also at least 75 troops in Turkey training Syrian opposition militia, and there may be others doing the same in Jordan.

Since 30 June, the government has also made clear that it would like to extend its bombing campaign to targets in Syria, where some members of the anti-Islamic State coalition already conduct attacks supported by RAF reconnaissance aircraft and drones. It is not clear if this would require any more aircraft or personnel than those currently deployed in Cyprus and the Gulf. This would follow a vote in parliament, considered necessary given the Coalition defeat on the issue of bombing President Assad's forces in Syria in August 2013.

Oddly, part of the rationale for extending UK action to Syria is the late June terrorist attack on mostly British holidaymakers in Tunisia, which was linked to Islamic State but appears to have been planned from lawless Libya. The UK is meanwhile one of several European states pushing for a UN mandate to allow EU military forces, including British attack helicopters and possibly the SAS or SBS, to attack and disrupt human trafficking operations along Libya's coast to prevent illegal migration to Italy and Malta.

What we don't yet know...

What is the UK strategy for peace and security in Iraq, Syria and Libya?

What is still missing from the proposed extension of UK military operations into Syria and Libya is the larger strategy for peace in either country or the wider Middle East and North Africa region. This is not necessarily something that the SDSR can resolve but it is something that the NSS needs to address and once again underlines the necessity for defence policy to be rooted in a broader, longer term security strategy.

While it is certainly the case that the government is devoting much thought internally and with its foreign partners to how to confront, contain and defeat Islamic State, it is also clear that it does not yet have a coherent strategy. It cannot be sure that more bombing of Islamic State will either degrade that movement, which thrives on anti-'crusaderist' propaganda, or contribute to the goal of a stable post-Assad Syria.

The EU plan to attack people traffickers in Libya and sink their boats is so nonsensical that it is difficult to believe that it was not concocted by European leaders in a bid to be seen to be doing something muscular to prevent in-migration, safe in the knowledge that the UN Security Council would scupper any attempt at a mandate to use force. Such potential interventions help to make the case for why such expensive equipment as aircraft carriers might be useful for military operations, but not how such military operations might contribute to international or national security.

5. The government wants to spend more on remote control warfare

Finally, Mr Cameron made it known in a speech on 13 July that his government would prioritise spending on Special Forces, drones and surveillance aircraft as part of the defence policy review, with particular focus on combating Islamic State. He also stated that the government would look at ways for the new Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers to deploy drones and Special Forces as part of counter-terrorism operations.

The government has thus made it a priority to follow the US lead in investing heavily in 'remote control' warfare technologies permitting rapid intervention over a wide radius with minimal or very short term presence of British forces on the ground.

What we don't yet know...

The unknowns here are intrinsic to the secretive technology sought: where will we seek to deploy and use it, and what will be the terms of its use?

Where are the UK's drones and Special Forces?

At present the RAF has ten MQ-9 Reaper armed drones, procured from the US for use in Afghanistan from 2007. Their planned redeployment to their pilot station at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire (where they would be stored given their lack of license to fly in UK airspace) has been disrupted by their use in Operation Shader over Iraq and (reconnaissance only, so far) Syria. However, unlike manned aircraft, the government will not confirm or deny details of how many Reapers are in use over the Middle East or where they fly from. Mr Fallon stated in June that every one of the UK's drones was "out on service" but not where they were in service. Rumours of their use in West Africa or over Yemen remain just that.

A similar situation surrounds UK special operations forces: the Special Air Service (SAS), Special Boat Service (SBS), Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR) and other units. Successive governments have invested in Special Forces capabilities since at least the advent of operations in Afghanistan in 2001 but we still don't know how many personnel serve in these units or where they serve. Like submarines and drones, the nature of their operations is covert and usually deniable. We know roughly that UK Special Forces have engaged in operations in Libya, Mali, Nigeria and Iraq since 2011, in most cases in contexts in which the UK was keen to deny it had any presence on the ground.

Under what conditions may UK drones and Special Forces be used?

As Jon Moran concluded in a recent Remote Control Project publication, UK 'remote warfare' capability is in danger of being "a collection of tactical innovations which is in danger of becoming an end in itself". Since few British lives are directly at stake, it also lowers the perceived risk threshold for foreign interventions. In other words, such tools as Special Forces and drones are stop gap measures useful in the absence of a larger strategy but unable to win wars on their own. This returns us to the question of long-term strategy and how the priorities already being outlined for the SDSR fit with the updated NSS.

Conclusion

While the early clarity on the new Conservative Government's priorities for defence procurement and expenditure are welcome, there are four issues of concern that emerge from this analysis of what we do and do not know about the current SDSR.

The first is the lack of transparency in the process. Despite repeated assurances from the Coalition government to ORG and numerous other civil society groups that the 2015 process would be much more open than the 2010 scramble, the parameters of the SDSR remain obscure and engagement with outside parties seems to be minimal. The UK's main partners including the US, France and Germany have defence review processes

much more open to scrutiny and comment by legislative, external and even foreign peers. While respecting the essentially secret nature of defence planning, the UK should have the confidence to be as open.

The second is the growing disjuncture between Scotland and the rest of the UK on the issue of nuclear weapons. A parliamentary majority in favour of Trident renewal next year seems almost certain, just as the expression of majority Scottish disapproval becomes manifest. While constitutionally the Scottish Government must cede to Westminster on defence, the prospect of Trident becoming a major political issue within the Union next year is high.

The third is an accelerated drift away from accountability, particularly in terms of what it means for the UK to go to war. Investment in remote warfare technologies lowers the threshold for foreign interventions at a time when we already don't know where the most potent military assets of the UK are deployed and what they are doing in the name of national security. The Chancellor's announcement of an ill-defined £1.5 billion Joint Security Fund for intelligence also raises questions of accountability in the face of creeping counter-terrorist policy.

Last and by no means least is the weakness of any strategy underpinning government security policy, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. We can be fairly sure that the UK will have superior firepower to adversaries such as the Islamic State for the foreseeable future but what is the end state that we are trying to deliver and how, if at all, does military action help the UK to deliver it? Doubtless the parallel NSS review and SDSR are not being conducted in isolation from each other but without the long-term strategic context of the former the tools that the latter delivers will not make the nation or wider world any more secure.

About the Author

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