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SDSR 2015: Continuity, Control and Crisis in UK Defence Policy

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Overview

In its [preview](#) of the UK's 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), ORG highlighted the key issues which needed to be addressed if the government was to present a strategic and sustainable approach to improving national, regional and international security. With the SDSR released on 23 November, in combined form with a new National Security Strategy, ORG publishes two briefings that review the government's policies and plans and outline the main actors and interests driving them. This is done over two papers. This first explores some of the key drivers behind current UK security policy, considering areas of continuity and change in relation to the evolving domestic, regional and international political scene. A second will provide a critical assessment of the government's response to the key strategic issues identified ahead of the SDSR.

Introduction

Since 1998 British governments have published defence reviews about once every five years, setting out how they plan to act on the global stage and the military capabilities and other defence and foreign policy tools required to realise their vision. This compares to reviews every eight or nine years during the more static Cold War period. These documents are significant because they reveal much about the present thinking and worldview of Whitehall security planners, including senior civil servants and government ministers. However, these reviews are also like the tips of icebergs as much lies beneath the visible surface, requiring deeper investigation if government policy is to be viewed in its proper context alongside the geopolitical forces, or identified threats, shaping it.

In order to understand current UK defence and security policy - what it consists of and where it came from - this paper critically examines the 2015 SDSR. Exploring the forces behind this document requires us to look in historical perspective and in several directions if we are to see the world, as best we can, through the eyes of Whitehall planners, understand the powerful actors and interests - including those from well outside Whitehall, including the corporate and financial sector - that drive London's decision-making, weigh the costs and benefits of their existing policies and then consider alternatives.

Ultimately, the point of doing this is to understand in what ways and why a sizable gap exists between current British policy, broadly characterised by its continuity - with London as Washington's loyal lieutenant doing its share to maintain the US-led global order - and the kind of actions needed for a more progressive, sustainable approach to security.

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In addition to the UK's relationship with the US, which largely defines the parameters within which British strategy can and does operate, this paper therefore examines other key factors driving Whitehall policy today. These are necessarily selective and focus on a few key issues, including public opinion, energy import dependence, corporate and financial influence, and developments in the Middle East. The objective is to capture the ways in which UK defence and security policy remains unchanged, the ways in which it has been reconfigured and rationalised, and the reasons behind some of the most important recent developments.

Unquestioned foundations: the still-special relationship?

The primary factor determining British defence and foreign policy is the nature of London's relationship with Washington. As James De Waal [notes](#), the idea that through being the US's closest ally, Britain can influence its behaviour 'has been a consistent theme in British international policy'. To do this, so Whitehall planners argue, Britain requires a sizable military budget for highly capable expeditionary forces, interoperable with those of the US. As Malcolm Chalmers [explains](#), Britain's military capabilities are thus now 'primarily designed to be used as contributions to collective operations, rather than in defence of uniquely national interests. Thus, for most of the more challenging types of operations, the UK only envisages committing its armed forces to operations if the US is also doing so'.

By remaining a leading military power, the UK can appropriately help ease the US's burden as the global hegemon, providing 'security' and enforcing 'order'. This order, founded on the promotion of open markets and the control of energy supplies and strategic resources through unrivalled military strength, is of great benefit to US and UK business interests. David Cameron has thus not only faced pressure from hawks and Atlanticists in parliament to maintain high levels of military spending, but also from Washington. For example, former defence secretary Robert Gates [warned](#) in January 2014 that defence cuts would mean that the UK 'won't have full spectrum capabilities and the ability to be a full partner as they have been in the past.'

As Chalmers [notes](#), US planners value the UK in certain key areas where it is 'one of only a small number of allies' able to contribute to US operations, including its advanced hunter-killer submarines and surveillance aircraft, 'world-class intelligence services and special forces, and active UN Security Council engagement'. The UK has also shown its willingness to deploy its military in support of highly controversial US interventions on several occasions over recent years, including in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

This record of political support, plus the UK's special status as a nuclear weapon state (the UK is dependent on the US regarding nuclear procurement but [reportedly](#) has independence regarding the decision to detonate the bomb) alongside the US in NATO, provides an important legitimating and moral dimension. For, as former special assistant to President George W. Bush, Franklin Miller [noted](#) regarding the US-UK Mutual Defense Agreement (the pillar of the Special Relationship since 1958), 'it's always useful to have someone else in the dock with you'.

The Foreign Affairs Committee therefore [noted](#) in its 2010 report into UK-US relations, that in much of the evidence it received a 'recurrent theme' was that 'the UK's approach to the US could more appropriately be characterised as subservient rather than simply subordinate'. The consequence of British subservience is that, as analyst Shashank Joshi [observed](#) regarding the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria - but which can be applied more generally under current arrangements - 'there can be no independent British

strategy, but only British contributions to US strategy'. Whitehall-watchers bemoaning Britain's inability to craft and implement its own strategic vision might therefore benefit from listening to the Public Administration Select Committee whose 2010 report [noted](#) that an 'uncritical acceptance' of the special relationship had led 'to a waning of our interests in, and ability to make, National Strategy'.

Rather than taking on board this committee's recommendations, which included 'the need to ensure democratic legitimacy and to recognise the political limits of what strategy and our national interests can achieve', the 2015 SDSR continued with business as usual, [illustrated](#) by its lack of serious consultation or engagement with civil society and alternative viewpoints. The government thus made clear that the US would continue to be the UK's 'pre-eminent partner', outlining that London would contribute to the special relationship through 'our European and global reach and influence; intelligence; the strategic location of our Overseas Territories; as well as military interoperability, and the UK's ability to undertake war-fighting independently or as a lead nation in a coalition'. The language of partnership used to describe the relationship suggests an equality which misrepresents Washington's far greater strength and ability to call the shots within a Whitehall establishment that cannot accept becoming a middling European power stripped of its military resources and nuclear weapons.

Military renaissance? Reactions to the 2015 SDSR

As a result of the government's decision to [protect](#) the military from further cutbacks, the 2015 SDSR was well received by several prominent analysts and commentators. Chalmers [argued](#) that Britain was now 'no longer in retreat' so that 'the UK's reputation as a reliable security partner' had been restored, while the Economist [believed](#) Britain was 'reasserting itself as a serious military power'. Prior to the last defence review, [observers](#) such as Michael Codner had warned that defence cuts would leave the country at risk of becoming 'Little Britain' with overseas operations abandoned in favour of territorial defence. Yet following the Conservative's 2015 election win, it appears that Chancellor George Osborne calculated that while austerity [must continue](#) for most other departments, it was possible and necessary to provide the military with a range of expensive new equipment to maintain its full-spectrum capabilities.

Prior to the SDSR, Osborne had sprung a '[summer surprise](#)' by making the Ministry of Defence a protected department, with annual real-terms budget increases of 0.5 per cent a year up to 2020/21. Allocations for new equipment over the next decade thus rose £12 billion to £178 billion, [boosting](#) UK arms giants BAE Systems and Rolls Royce's share prices. US companies such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin would also benefit from the new order sheet, which [included](#) four ballistic missile submarines, nine maritime patrol aircraft, twenty-four F-35 strike fighter jets and eight Type 26 frigates. There would also be more money for high-altitude drones, intelligence, cyber capabilities and Special Forces.

Strategic raiding: Neo-mercantilist security policy

Much of this reinforced air and naval capability, plus the new Astute class hunter-killer submarines, will be focused on equipping and supporting the UK's two hugely expensive new aircraft carriers, which should both enter service by 2020. Critics such as Richard Norton-Taylor have [questioned](#) whether the carriers are anything more than 'white elephants on the ocean' because of their vulnerability to attacks, quoting a former senior military officer who said that they are a 'combination of naval vanity and pork barrel

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politics'. Simon Williams, meanwhile, [argued](#) that the need to escort the carriers would 'further reduce the number of ships available for dedicated trade protection and counter-piracy operations'.

Elsewhere, the authors of a Royal Aeronautical Society (RAS) [report](#) on the UK's maritime strategy, saw the benefits of the carriers, including the freedom of action and 'political leverage' they would give to the UK concerning missions during alliance operations. Carriers thus provide the ability to 'deploy air power from anywhere in the world, without the need for friendly air bases on land', and to support the US Navy, which 'hopes that a UK carrier task group will provide sufficient capability to replace one of its 11 US task groups on station'. Indeed, a December 2014 [document](#) - signed by US Navy Admiral Jonathan Greenert and Admiral Sir George Zambellas, chief of the Royal Navy - highlighted a 'shared vision', putting the carriers at the centre of a 'new era of interoperability' to 'deepen' the US-UK 'partnership' at a time when the maritime domain is of 'growing importance'.

The global power projection capabilities that the carriers provide are also necessary, according to the RAS's analysis, because of the UK's economic reliance both on seaborne trade and the City of London as one of the world's top financial centres. Given the openness of the UK economy, 'significant interruption to sea lines of communication or loss of confidence in financial markets can have disproportionately large effects on the United Kingdom compared with other countries'. The potential for political crises to develop in regions of conflict with maritime dimensions means that Whitehall planners are therefore keen to prevent any interruption to UK shipping- which [carries](#) 95% of British trade.

Partly in response to the vulnerability of these worldwide economic interests, including sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and key chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, which leads out of the Persian Gulf and through which [flows](#) about 30% of all seaborne-traded oil, the 2015 SDSR - [according](#) to Michael Clarke - marked an evolution in British strategy towards the concept of 'strategic raiding'. For [Codner](#), this concept is a 'maritime option' which 'refocuses' the armed forces on 'short-term operations using agile specialist ground forces. It emphasises sea basing and very early presence and inducement operations'. Faster and more agile forces are necessary, [according to](#) the Ministry of Defence's Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, because in the future there may be 'significantly less time available' to respond to disruptive 'global and regional events that emerge rapidly'.

In addition to the desire to speedily project force at and from sea and the UK's history as a maritime power, the idea of strategic raiding is informed by an understanding that the disastrous Iraq and Afghanistan wars have severely reduced the will amongst the public and in Westminster for committing ground troops to long-term deployments. This is part of a wider public ambivalence to the use of force. For example, coinciding with the retreat from Iraq and the escalation of military operations in Afghanistan's Helmand province, a 2010 research project by academics Rob Johns and Graeme Davies [found](#) that 35% of the British public either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'The use of military force only makes problems worse', whilst 42% were neutral and 25% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

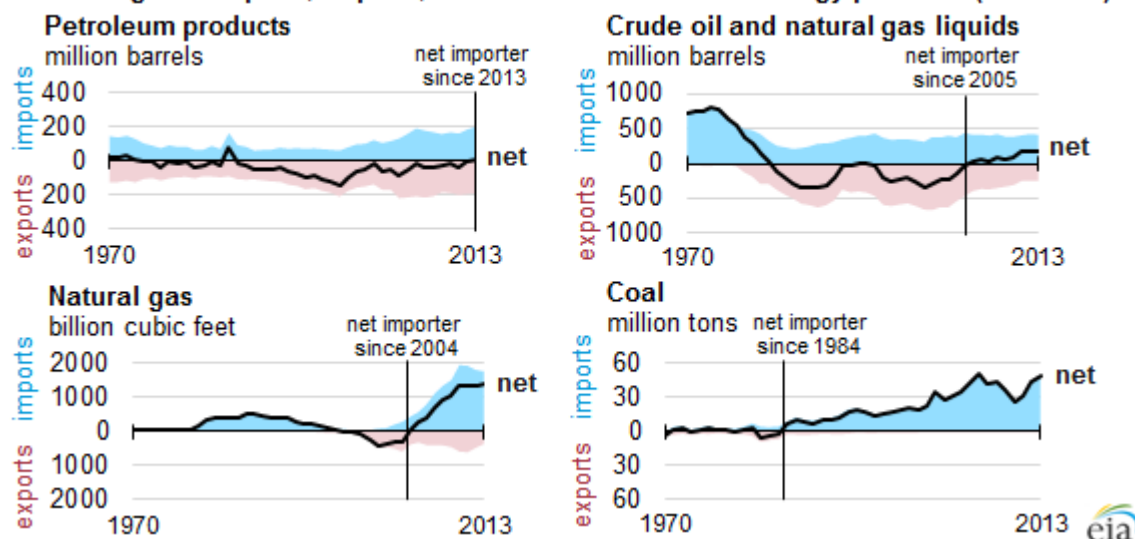
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Energy insecurity: Causes and consequences

If the special, if asymmetric, relationship with the US and the UK's strategic economic orientation to global trade are the unchanging fundamentals of UK security policy, it is the UK's growing dependence on energy imports that provides the dominant dynamic of the current SDSR. Combined with the perceived growth in threat from Islamic State and other radical jihadist groups, these three factors together serve to condition the SDSR's clear orientation towards a role for the UK military in the wider Middle East and Persian Gulf in particular.

Britain's shift from being a net exporter to a net importer of energy was [highlighted](#) by the Labour government in its 2003 Department of Trade and Industry white paper *Our energy future – Creating a low carbon economy*. From the mid-2000s the UK, as predicted, became a net [importer](#) of crude oil and natural gas as North Sea production declined. In 2013 the UK also became a net [importer](#) of petroleum products. As historian Mark Curtis has [explained](#), from a strategic point of view, the significance of this shift in the early 2000s is that it strongly informed Britain's increasing focus on power projection to secure foreign energy supplies.

United Kingdom imports, exports, and net trade of selected energy products (1970-2013)



[Source:](#) U.S. Energy Information Administration, from UK Department of Energy and Climate Change

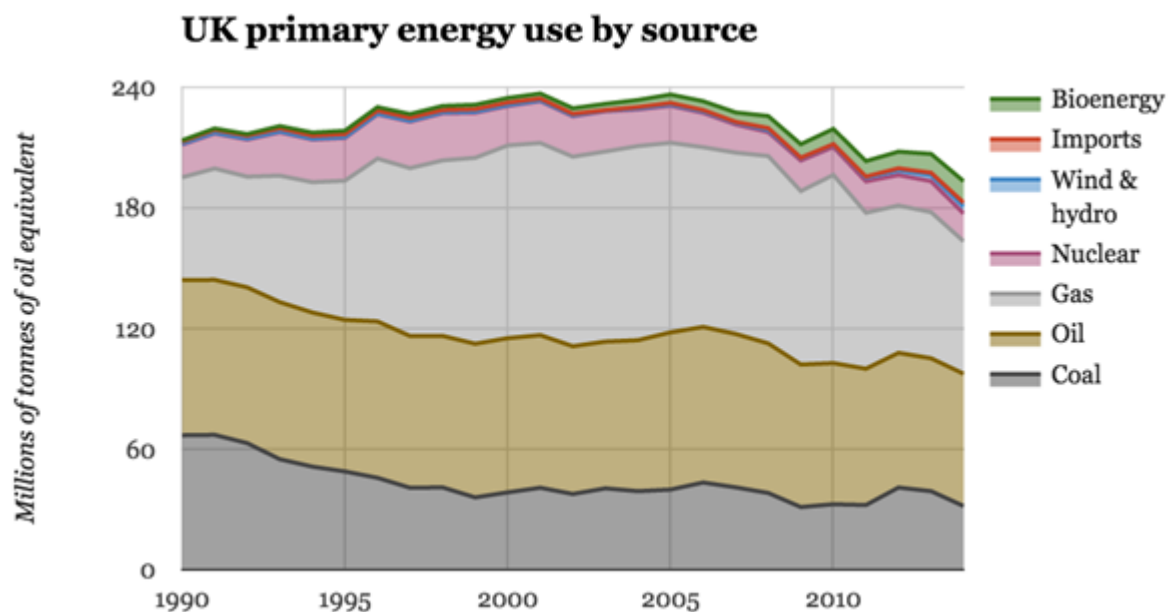
Some years before the shift to energy import dependence, Labour's 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) [described](#) how the UK relied on 'foreign countries for supplies of raw materials, above all oil' so that 'outside Europe our interests are most likely to be affected by events in the Gulf and the Mediterranean'. This required the UK to engage in 'force projection' because 'in the post cold war world we must be prepared to go to the crisis rather than have the crisis come to us'. In terms of military capabilities, two larger aircraft carriers were thus ordered 'to project power more flexibly around the world', alongside a range of other new weapons systems. The emphasis on force projection continued with the new chapter added to the SDR in 2002, [highlighting](#) 'the emphasis on expeditionary operations', and the need for 'rapidly deployable intervention forces'.

As Curtis [notes](#), the 2003 Defence White Paper *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, 'says that British intervention capability needs to go beyond even that envisaged in these two earlier documents'. This document, published nine months after the invasion of Iraq,

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[stated](#) that the UK ‘must extend our ability to project force further afield than the SDR envisaged’ including in ‘crises occurring across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia’ and arising from ‘the wider threat from international terrorism’. The bipartisan consensus on defence and security policy was thereafter shown in the coalition government’s 2010 SDSR, which [emphasised](#) the requirement for ‘strategic military power projection’ to ‘defend our interests’, including ‘protecting trade and energy supplies’. The potential for conflict over supply of resources was thus used to justify high levels of military spending given the ‘range of risks’ relating to the UK’s ability to ‘access secure, diverse and affordable supplies of energy’ which are ‘likely to intensify over the coming years, due to our growing dependence on imports of fossil fuels’.

What is not mentioned in official documents such as this, but is of vital importance, is that in addition to securing access to sources of energy from a diverse range of producer states, maintaining strong relations with them and [minimising](#) ‘the risk of disruption to supplies from regional disputes or local instability’, the UK’s focus on power projection forms part of a long-standing US/UK geopolitical strategy to *control* the cheap and plentiful energy [reserves](#) of the Middle East.



UK primary energy use by source. Source: [DUKES table 1.1.1](#). Chart by [Carbon Brief](#)

The national interest vs the multinational’s interest

Turning to the situation today, the 2015 SDSR [outlines](#) that the UK’s dependence on imported energy is set to grow sharply in future:

‘oil and gas production from the UK continental shelf will gradually decline and our reliance on imported hydrocarbons is likely to grow over the next few decades. Currently, around 40% of the oil we use is imported, and projections suggest that this could increase to 73% by 2030. Further measures to protect and diversify sources of supply will become increasingly important, including the new Southern Corridor pipeline [from the Caspian via Turkey], US liquid natural gas (LNG)

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exports, further supplies of Australian LNG, and increased supply from Norway and North Africa’.

Protecting energy supplies is a growing priority because, as the Energy and Climate Change Committee [argued](#) in 2011, increased reliance on oil and gas imports ‘leaves the UK more open to supply risks associated with global supply constraints and price volatility’. Connected to these supply risks is the prospect of rapidly growing demand from China and India, which will mean the UK having to increasingly compete with these and other nations for diminishing resources. Moreover, obtaining oil and gas is different from other resources given their location in regions of geopolitical tension, such as West and North Africa and the Middle East, and the need for continuity of supply in vast volumes. The result has been the incredible militarisation of supplier regions in order to keep sea-lanes open and protect energy corridors.

Securing overseas oil and gas supplies is an increasing priority not only for the UK but Europe as a whole given that the continent is also becoming increasingly dependent on energy imports. According to 2009 [figures](#) from the European Commission, if business as usual continues, by 2030 Europe will rely on imports to meet 94% of its oil needs and 83% of gas demand. As a result of ‘diversifying energy sources, routes and types’ to supply Europe’s needs, Andrew Monaghan of the NATO Defense College therefore [observes](#) that the use of sea lanes will increase, so that NATO will need to ‘provide coordination of naval assets to protect oil and gas shipments, for instance to protect Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) tankers on the high seas’. The UK’s own maritime capabilities should therefore be seen as a contribution to NATO’s wider strategy to secure energy supplies for Europe, with the military alliance’s ‘political guidance’ directly ‘informing’ the decisions made by the 2015 SDSR.

From a sustainable security perspective, the UK’s growing reliance on imported oil and gas is not inevitable but an irresponsible political choice. As recent investigations by the Guardian newspaper have [shown](#), rather than being the ‘greenest government ever’ the Conservative Party has granted fossil fuel companies - such as Shell, BP, ExxonMobil, Total, ConocoPhillips, Chevron and the trade organisation Oil & Gas UK - much greater access to government than renewable energy companies or climate campaigns. BP in particular has an extremely close relationship with the government and was prominent in successful industry [efforts](#) that pushed the EU to support gas instead of renewable energy. As a result of the [information](#) unearthed by their Freedom of Information requests concerning Foreign Office dealings with energy multinationals, journalists Felicity Lawrence and Harry Davies therefore concluded that government policy ‘still barely distinguishes between the British national interest and the commercial interests of its main oil and gas companies’.

Groups such as ORG and the Institute for Public Policy and Research (IPPR) have been [warning](#) for several years that the UK needs to undertake a radical shift in terms of its energy supply and use. Given the imperative of avoiding dangerous global warming, Jenny Bird of IPPR thus insisted in her 2007 report that it was ‘a critical time for determining the future energy security of the UK as decisions about new infrastructure made in the next few years will determine the course of energy use for the next two or three decades’. Yet as George Monbiot recently [noted](#), if the 2015 Infrastructure Act becomes law, the UK government will be legally obliged to ‘maximise economic recovery of the UK’s oil and gas’, further cementing our reliance on fossil fuels and undermining recent agreements to limit global warming made at the UN climate talks in Paris.

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Britain's new 'shadow presence' in the Gulf

In addition to understanding how the UK's increasing dependence on oil and gas imports impacts on UK defence and foreign policy it is also important to appreciate the ways in which this shift interacts with other key issues. Of particular interest for the results of the 2015 SDSR and the current direction of British strategy, is the interaction between the UK's growing energy import dependence and its evolving engagement with the Middle East.

While the UK is currently far less dependent on energy imports from the Gulf (LNG imports from Qatar are the exception) than many major economies, particularly those of South and East Asia, this region is of immense geopolitical importance to London in the long-term given its immense hydrocarbon reserves, the real and potential economic consequences of regional war - including potential escalation in the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia - and the UK's various political, military and trade ties with Middle Eastern governments.

It is therefore significant that the 2015 SDSR announced an increased British presence in the Gulf, stating that the UK 'will build a permanent and more substantial UK military presence to reflect our historic relationships, the long-term nature of both challenges and opportunities and to reassure our Gulf allies'. These includes a much expanded naval base in Bahrain, supporting Royal Navy deployments in the region including the new aircraft carriers, and the establishment of a new British Defence Staff in the Middle East. Whilst the government's new Gulf Strategy has yet to be published, the main questions that will likely be addressed concern how the various military-related arrangements the UK has with states in the region, such as basing, training, intelligence and arms sales, may be made coherent, and co-ordinated with the US and other partners. They also require justifying, given the numerous human rights [violations](#) committed by the UK's regional partners and documented, with embarrassment and some editing, by annual Foreign Office reports.

Notably, the UK's new Gulf deployments appear to be being constructed in a less visible fashion than in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, presumably partly in order not to arouse public opposition. For [Michael Clarke](#), the military thus 'intends to build up a strong shadow presence around the Gulf; not an evident imperial-style footprint, but a smart presence with facilities, defence agreements, rotation of training, transit and jumping-off points for forces that aim to be more adaptable and agile as they face the post-Afghanistan years from 2014'.

Securing energy supplies is one of several strategic rationales behind Britain's renewed commitment to the Gulf. These included the perceived need to 'do something' to meet US expectations of burden-sharing, the need to deter Iran in the context of a regional proxy war with Sunni Arab states, the provision of security guarantees to Gulf states with relatively weak militaries during a time of social and political turmoil, and the cementing of political ties to ensure the continuation of lucrative [arms deals](#). The increased importance to the UK of foreign energy therefore means that the value of supplier states - such as Qatar - to the UK can only grow, providing a further reason why Britain's future will be firmly intertwined with that of the Middle East in the absence of a meaningful policy of developing alternative and sustainable energy sources.

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Conclusion

The 2015 SDSR cannot be considered to be a genuinely strategic review reflecting the British national interest firstly because it did not critically examine the costs and benefits of the UK-US relationship. As long as the basic parameters of British defence and foreign policy continue to be set in Washington, Whitehall planners will have relatively little room for manoeuvre or independent strategic thought.

One area where London might pursue its own path within Washington's orbit - with potentially significant impacts on the UK's military posture, including where and how it projects power - concerns the types and sources of energy that it relies on. A key problem here is that powerful oil and gas multinationals have exercised a decisive influence on energy policy, both in the UK and EU, cementing this and future generations' reliance on fossil fuels. Thus while the recent UN climate change conference in Paris was hailed as a success for aiming to limit global warming to 1.5C, the UK and the rest of the G20 continue to [prop up](#) oil, gas and coal production. The continued reliance on non-renewables both increases the risk of climate catastrophe and conflict given that many of these resources are in unstable regions of the world.

The UK's response has been to consolidate its investment in its military capabilities as new aircraft and ships are bought to keep sea lanes open, protect energy corridors and maintain friendly regimes in volatile, resource rich regions, such as the Middle East. Following the neo-mercantilist orientation of government policy and the UK's leading position as a base for multinational oil companies and as a producer and exporter of weapons systems, there is a clear corporate interest in the maintenance of the 'defence consensus' on high military spending and entrenchment in the Middle East. Moving to a sustainable security paradigm must surely therefore involve firewalling the British state, in its formulation of the national interest, from corporate and private interests, especially if environmental and human concerns, are to be placed before the interests of a narrow economic elite and its vested interests.

About the Author

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