Written evidence from Professor Paul Cornish

Hard Power and Soft Politics:
Anticipating The UK Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015

Introduction

This paper is written with an eye to the UK’s forthcoming defence review. If the review proceeds as is widely supposed, it will be coupled to a new National Security Strategy (NSS 2015), will be known as the Strategic Defence and Security Review (a title borrowed from its 2010 predecessor), will be launched at some point after the 2015 general election and will be completed and published either later that year or early in 2016. For the purposes of this paper the review and resulting publication will be known as SDSR 2015.

Where security and defence are concerned, there are two immediate problems with a formal review of the sort the UK has experienced periodically in recent years. The first is that a ‘review’, by definition, is a public policy discussion which looks back to recent events and challenges. In many respects this is to be welcomed; history and experience can offer a more grounded and reassuring guide to policy than either theory or mere speculation. Yet when shaping a prospective and complex public policy agenda there are, of course, obvious risks associated with staring too hard and for too long in the rear-view mirror. The second problem is that in any area of government an apparently reasonable and timely ‘policy review’ might be seen as an opportunity to address the urgent concerns of the present and to fulfil a different policy agenda altogether; such as the perceived need for retrenchment in public spending.

As well as the past and the present, national strategy must also take a close interest in the future; in the early recognition of trends and key events, in the prioritisation and re-prioritisation of challenges and responses, in timely preparation, co-ordination and appropriate action. Not even national strategists should be expected to have oracular capabilities, however – they are concerned with the strategic future but cannot of course predict it. The late J.K. Galbraith reportedly separated those forecasters ‘who know they don’t know’ from those ‘who don’t know they don’t know’; with so much at stake in national strategy, it is especially important to distinguish between those strategists who have wisdom in their ignorance and those who do not. The obscurity of the future is not the only difficulty national strategists must encounter, however. Over the past two decades or so, the relatively settled animosity of the Cold War has been replaced by a range of diverse, complex and often very urgent security threats and challenges, albeit of a lesser scale. And as well as uncertainty, diversity, complexity and urgency there are also scarcity and austerity to consider: national strategy, security and defence must compete for scarce resources and must take its share of continuing retrenchment in public spending.

Yet national strategy is not a fair weather activity: decisions must be made and cannot be postponed until more favourable circumstances arise. Among the most complicated of these decisions are those which concern a country’s military force structure – the material basis of its so-called ‘hard power’. These decisions are complicated for a variety of reasons: they require a reasonably settled ‘threat picture’ around which to construct a military architecture; they require sufficient flexibility to deal with unanticipated threats and challenges; they require political, public and media support if they are to be maintained over time; they require advanced technological knowledge; and finally they require a very high level of political and institutional confidence in spending vast amounts of public money on platforms and equipment which might be expected to be in service for several decades.

With SDSR 2015 in prospect, the purpose of this paper is to gauge the strategic quality and vitality of UK hard power. Like many other commentators, my assessment is that UK hard power is not currently in the best of health; yet the reasons for this condition are too often misunderstood or simplified. There is widespread concern that the UK’s armed forces have recently been reduced too far and, furthermore, that these reductions are the material evidence of a deep malaise in the British national psyche: a form of strategic ‘declinism’, perhaps. I am unconvinced that a narrow assessment of the size, shape and capability of a country’s armed forces reveals all that is to be said about its strategic ambition and indeed its hard power. The UK’s armed forces will certainly be smaller in 2020 (when the Future Force structure is proposed to be in place) than they were in 2010 (the year of the new Coalition Government’s first defence review). But this tells us little. *Reductio ad absurdum*, the UK’s armed forces will also be smaller than they were in 1989 (the beginning of the end of the Cold War), in 1982 (the Falklands War) and in 1945 (the end of the Second World War). So what? As well as assessing size, shape and capability, a complete analysis of a nation’s hard power requires an answer to one further question: “what is it all for?”

Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye define hard power as that which ‘enables countries to wield carrots and sticks to get what they want.’ In the case of the UK this definition should be extended a little: ‘... and as far away from the UK as possible.’ Since the end of the Cold War UK military power has become less concerned with the defence of the country’s territory (including its overseas possessions), its airspace and territorial waters, and much more concerned with addressing strategic challenges to the UK at their point of origin. In his introduction to the 1998 *Strategic Defence Review* the then Secretary of State for Defence, George (now Lord) Robertson argued that ‘In the post-Cold War world, we must be prepared to go to the crisis, rather than have the crisis come to us.’ This notion of self-defence at arm’s length subsequently became a *leitmotif* in UK national strategy, attracting bipartisan consensus. It also became the received wisdom in the Ministry of Defence, with one of the UK’s seven Military Tasks described in 2010 as ‘defending our interests by projecting power strategically and through expeditionary operations.’

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The first and most obvious indicator of the United Kingdom’s capacity to ‘get what it wants’ using hard power (particularly at arm’s length) is reputational; concerned with the nation’s experience of military operations, the effectiveness of those operations and the professional credibility of its armed forces. Other, more structural indicators should also be considered, particularly the amount that is spent on the country’s military force posture. Then there are capabilities: the platforms, equipment, weaponry and personnel necessary for military commitments and for expeditionary operations. Finally, and least tangibly, hard power is also the expression of foreign policy outlook and strategic intent. Each of these indicators is discussed in turn below.

Although national strategy is concerned with the future, a nation’s strategic posture – and particularly its hard power – cannot develop in an instant but must evolve over time. And this slowly evolving posture then, inevitably, acts as the point of departure for subsequent reviews. In order to account for the recent evolution of the UK’s hard power posture, this paper covers a 15 year period from July 1998 to mid-2014, beginning with the publication of the newly elected Labour government’s Strategic Defence Review (SDR); a document which marked the beginning of a new, genuinely post-Cold War era in strategic thinking in the UK.

UK Military Reputation

Britain’s armed forces approached the end of the 1990s having acquired considerable, and varied, operational experience. With the bulk of an armoured division, supported by air and sea power, the UK’s was the largest European contribution to the US-led coalition operations in the 1991 Gulf War. From 1992 to 1996 UK armed forces were closely involved in conflicts resulting from the break-up of Yugoslavia, contributing armed troops with air support to the ‘robust peacekeeping’ mission of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) and the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR). During the same period the Royal Air Force contributed to NATO air campaigns in former Yugoslavia. And it was not until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 that the UK could begin to make substantial reductions in its considerable military commitment to Northern Ireland, where Army, Royal Marine and Royal Air Force units had all acquired experience over decades in urban counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency operations.

In December 1998 UK and US air forces undertook Operation Desert Fox; a four day bombing campaign against targets in Iraq, in which aircraft of the Royal Air Force flew some fifteen per cent of the sorties. The following year, UK air forces participated in Operation Allied Force, NATO’s bombing campaign against targets in what was then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the UK subsequently contributed a substantial contingent to NATO’s Kosovo Force (KFOR). In the same year, one warship of the Royal Navy (HMS Glasgow) and a small contingent of British Army troops (with transport aircraft and helicopter support) took part in Operation Warden – the multinational peacekeeping force deployed to East Timor under Australian command. In 2000 the UK mounted two joint operations – involving land, sea and air forces – in Sierra Leone: Operation Palliser to evacuate non-combatants from Freetown and Operation Barras to rescue captured British troops. For some months during summer 2003, a small contingent of British land and air
forces also took part in Operation Artemis, the European Union-led crisis management operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

At the other end of the scale, the UK’s military involvement in Afghanistan began in late 2001 with a series of joint operations, such as Operations Veritas and Fingal. In June the following year Operation Herrick was launched; the UK’s contribution to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Operation Herrick has involved UK land, air and sea forces in a series of 20 deployments with the last of these ‘Operation Herrick XX’ to conclude the UK’s operational commitment to Afghanistan in December 2014. At the height of the campaign, in 2009-2010, some 9,500 UK military personnel were deployed to Afghanistan, including infantry, light armour, artillery and support troops, with fixed wing and helicopter attack and transport and surveillance aircraft.6

The UK’s most demanding military operation of the past decade was arguably Operation Telic; the British contribution to US-led operations in Iraq in March 2003 and the subsequent civil-military occupation and counter-insurgency campaign which lasted until 2011. The UK deployed no fewer than 46,000 personnel at the start of the commitment:7 a force comprising 30 Royal Navy warships and support ships; an armoured division with three combat brigades and a logistics brigade; and the full range of fixed wing and helicopter attack and transport aircraft. As with Operation Herrick, Operation Telic made use of the ‘roulement’ system, with 13 deployments between 2003 and 2011, each of about 5-6 months duration. Finally, the UK also contributed to the military intervention in Libya from March to October 2011. Operation Ellamy was principally a joint naval/air commitment: naval forces included principal surface combatants, cruise missile-firing submarines, mine counter-measure vessels and a helicopter carrier (HMS Ocean); air forces included fighter, strike, C4ISTAR and tanker aircraft, as well as attack and transport helicopters.

In summary, as far as experience and reputation are concerned, the stock of UK hard power could scarcely be higher. The UK’s armed forces have acquired a very high level of operational experience in the past 15 years and more. British land, sea and air forces have been involved in a wide variety of operations: from the very brief (four days) to the very lengthy (13 years); from the relatively small (Operation Warden) to the very large (Operation Telic); and in several different regions of the world (Africa, Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia). Although the roulement system used in Afghanistan and Iraq imposed significant strain on units and individuals, the UK’s long-term military commitments in particular have spread the direct experience of warfare and conflict across the UK’s armed forces. That body of experience continues to expand: at the time of revising this paper (October 2014) the UK’s armed forces were involved in air action against the ‘Islamic State’ in Iraq and had begun a non-combatant medical assistance deployment to West Africa in response to the Ebola crisis.

UK Military Expenditure

Military expenditure can be surprisingly difficult to track, as accounting procedures change from time to time. Yet it does, nevertheless, offer an important (and public) indication as to a country’s intentions and seriousness. The following table, drawn from data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s Military Expenditure Database, shows UK military expenditure from 1998-2013 as well as military expenditure as a percentage of GDP.

Table 1: Military Expenditure 1998-2013

![Military Expenditure 1998-2013](image)

These data do not paint a picture of radical decline in UK military expenditure since 1998: nor even *gradual* decline, for that matter. On the contrary, annual spending has been held at a healthy level, allowing the UK to maintain its position as one of the world’s top military spenders even in the straitened economic circumstances following the 2008 banking crisis. Equally, military expenditure as a percentage of GDP has remained at a relatively high level: as the government is fond of pointing out, together with the United States (and possibly Greece), the UK is one of very few NATO allies so far to have held to the 2006 commitment to spend a minimum of two per cent of GDP on defence.

This is not to suggest that discussion of UK military expenditure has been entirely free from contention. Since the transfer of power from Labour to the Coalition Government in 2010, the UK defence debate has been dominated by the discovery of a so-called ‘black hole’ in the defence budget: an unfunded liability of committed expenditure (largely on new equipment) over 10 years to 2020. A figure of £38bn (roughly equivalent to the UK annual defence budget) is most often cited although

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there are uncertainties as to how that sum was calculated. Nevertheless, in September 2011 Defence Secretary Liam Fox announced that the shortfall had been almost eliminated and just months later Philip Hammond, Fox’s successor, was reportedly confident that the ‘black hole’ had been eliminated entirely and that the government would indeed be able to fund the ‘Future Force 2020’ modernisation programme which had been announced in the SDSR 2010. In January 2013 the Ministry of Defence announced that it was now in a position to commit as much as £160bn over ten years to Defence Equipment Plan ‘that will enable the MoD to deliver Future Force 2020’. In Hammond’s words: ‘This £160 billion equipment plan will ensure the UK’s Armed Forces remain among the most capable and best equipped in the world, providing the military with the confidence that the equipment they need is fully funded.’

Hammond’s confidence is open to question, however. In the first place, there are concerns among defence industrialists and analysts of defence acquisition that the MoD have simply replaced the irresponsibility of overspending with the neurosis of underspending. By one account, successive ‘reform’, ‘transformation’ and ‘efficiency’ programmes have eroded the skills, morale and strength of the MoD’s civilian staff, resulting in ‘a department of state which, rather unusually, is both short of money and, with reduced personnel, lacking the capacity to spend the budget allocated to it.’ The defence budget also seems unlikely to escape the 2015 review unscathed; it has long been rumoured that the armed forces will face further and deeper financial cuts in 2015. Furthermore, certain of the budgetary assumptions upon which the FF2020 construct was based were challenged by a series of cuts and adjustments made in the 2013 UK government spending review. Not the least of these was the decision to depart from past practice where the funding of operational military deployments is concerned. Whereas in the past such costs had come from the Treasury’s contingency reserve, henceforth the MoD’s main budget will be liable for as much as fifty per cent of operational costs. With a recent assessment suggesting that the overall cost of UK involvement in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq could be in the region of £30bn, these costs might represent a very significant new charge on the defence budget. As Andrew Dorman and I have argued, ‘for these financial reasons alone it is difficult to see how the structure and goal of FF2020, as published in SDSR 2010, can be considered affordable and therefore achievable – unless, as some world-weary commentators suggest, 2025 is to become ‘the new 2020’.”

Finally, there are also growing doubts – reportedly even within the Ministry of Defence – that the UK will be able to sustain its ‘two per cent of GDP’ commitment

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12 ‘Armed forces could face even more cuts, Cameron admits’, The Daily Telegraph, 5 April 2013.
13 ‘Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were a ‘failure’ costing £29bn’, The Telegraph, 28 May 2014: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/10859545/Wars-in-Iraq-and-Afghanistan-were-a-failure-costing-29bn.html
14 Cornish and Dorman, ‘Fifty shades of purple?’, p.1187.
much beyond 2015, possibly reducing to as little as 1.6 per cent of GDP in 2024-25.\textsuperscript{15}

**UK Military Capabilities**

The picture is, ostensibly, rather less encouraging when military capabilities are considered. The following three tables show trends in land, naval and air capabilities respectively. Each table shows the regular (i.e. full-time, professional) personnel strength of the three types of force,\textsuperscript{16} as well as the key hard power, expeditionary capabilities in each case.

**Table 2: Deployable Land Forces 1998-2013**

The principal land force capability is the battalion-sized unit which could form the basis of a deployable battlegroup: the Army’s armoured regiments and infantry battalions, together with Royal Marine commandos. Artillery tactical fire support would be essential to any operational deployment and is also shown.

Table 2 shows a reduction of land force personnel\textsuperscript{17} by approximately 14 per cent between 1998-2013, while the number of deployable battalion-sized combat units (including Royal Marine commandos) reduced by some 10 per cent. Although these reductions could scarcely be described as radical, they are certainly significant.

\textsuperscript{15} ‘UK defence spending to fall below Nato target, says research’, Financial Times (online), 15 June 2014: [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/81907de8-f089-11e3-8f3d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3GOMAADry](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/81907de8-f089-11e3-8f3d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3GOMAADry)

\textsuperscript{16} All personnel data in Tables 2-4 have been drawn from official UK publications, principally Ministry of Defence, UK Defence Statistics Compendium (1998-2002) and UK Defence Statistics Factsheets (2003-2013): [http://www.dasa.mod.uk/index.php/publications/UK-defence-statistics-compendium](http://www.dasa.mod.uk/index.php/publications/UK-defence-statistics-compendium). However, since a single, consistent data series on UK armed forces personnel strength is not readily available, personnel data entries are best read as trend indicators rather than real values.

\textsuperscript{17} For the purposes of this essay, land force personnel include the regular, full-time strength of the British Army (as published), plus 6,000 to cover the nominal strength of the Royal Marines.
particularly when lengthy operational commitments are undertaken: the fewer the units, the greater the frequency of deployment, with attendant effects on morale and family life, as well as retention. Projections to FF2020 show a further 11 per cent reduction in both personnel and deployable units from 2013.

Table 3: Deployable Naval Forces 1998-2013
As well as the strength of regular naval personnel, Table 3 shows the number of warships in three categories: attack submarines (SSN); aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates (Principal Surface Combatants – PSC); and Principal Amphibious Ships (PAS).

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In Table 3, the personnel trend shows a reduction of approximately one third in regular naval personnel between 1998-2013, with further reductions to be implemented under the FF2020 plan. Although the number of PAS has been held constant over this period, the number of SSN has been reduced by over 40 per cent and the number of PSC by almost 50 per cent. The PSC trend line includes the temporary abandonment by the UK of its aircraft carrier capability, but with HMS Queen Elizabeth expected to be in commission by 2020 and HMS Prince of Wales to follow at some point thereafter (and therefore not included in the chart above).

Table 4: Deployable Air Forces 1998-2013
Table 4 shows the regular personnel strength of the Royal Air Force as well as the number of aircraft in six key categories: fighter and fighter/ground attack aircraft (FTR/FGA); attack helicopters (Atk Hel); command, control and communication

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18 For the purposes of this essay, naval personnel include the regular, full-time strength of the Royal Navy (as published), minus 6,000 representing the nominal strength of the Royal Marines counted in Table 2.
Between 1998 and 2013 the personnel strength of the Royal Air Force reduced by roughly 37 per cent. In the same period, the number of FTR/FGA aircraft – arguably the most vivid and potent symbol of modern air power (at least until crewed aircraft finally give way to remotely piloted aircraft or ‘drones’) – shrank by over 40 per cent to 220. That figure might see a further small reduction by 2020 although it is also possible that Tranche 1 of the Typhoon fleet (53 aircraft) might have been taken out of service by 2020. If so, the UK’s FTR/FGA fleet will be some 155 in 2020, representing a reduction of just over 60 per cent from the 1998 figure. In other respects, the deployable strength of UK air forces was held more or less stable over the period covered by this paper: C4ISTAR, attack helicopters and transport aircraft (fixed wing and rotary) are all essential for the projection of hard power in an ‘expeditionary’ setting and all are expected to remain available in significant numbers.21

Taken together, Tables 2-4 clearly indicate major reductions in the military capability and personnel strength of UK armed forces since 1998. But the deeper significance of these changes is harder to gauge. Reductions in UK military power cannot be said to have been negligible, but neither do they seem to have been irreversible and
fundamental. It would be difficult to argue, for example, that as a consequence of these reductions the UK has given up hard power altogether to the point that it could no longer defend itself, or that it has allowed its armed forces to become ‘unbalanced’ – a claim which is likely to be made loudly and frequently in the approach to SDSR 2015. Where a national military posture is concerned, ‘balance’ should be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, we should expect to find consistency and equilibrium in political and budgetary commitment to land, sea and air forces respectively. By this interpretation, an ‘unbalanced’ force would be one which sacrificed, say, air power in order to fund a naval construction programme. Qualitative balance is achieved by setting the size of a force, on the one hand, against its technological proficiency and its military effectiveness on the other. Thus, if a smaller force equipped with better equipment can achieve as much or more than a larger force with inferior equipment then the smaller force might still be said to be balanced.

There are, of course, important gaps in this survey; most notably in C4ISTAR (including maritime patrol), a modern suppression of enemy air defence (SEAD) capability, medium-range surface-to-air missiles and anti-ballistic missiles and cyber capabilities (defensive and offensive). What should also be borne in mind in this survey of UK military capability is military equipment quality (MEQ).\textsuperscript{22} The MEQ of obsolescent aircraft such as the Jaguar cannot usefully be set against that of the Typhoon and the F35 Lightning; the Astute class of submarines is more capable than its predecessor, as is the Type 45 destroyer; the A330 Voyager strategic transport/tanker aircraft will be more reliable than its predecessors, etc. Old equipment is scarcely, if ever, replaced on a one-for-one basis; where military force is concerned, numbers and size are emphatically not everything. It should also be borne in mind that ‘capability’ has long since ceased to be synonymous with ‘weapon’ or ‘weapon platform’: modern military capability is best understood as a highly sophisticated, integrated C4ISTAR system. This is the case even at the level of the individual combatant. The modern infantry soldier, for example, should deploy on operations with a variety of high quality personal, crew-served and indirect fire weaponry at his or her disposal. Body armour and vehicle protection have seen considerable improvements while advanced communications and reconnaissance/surveillance equipment have ensured unprecedented levels of battlefield situational awareness.

**UK Strategic Intent**


1998: *Strategic Defence Review*

\textsuperscript{22} For leading analysis on this subject see Steven Bowns and Scott Gebicke, ‘From R&D Investment to Fighting Power, 25 Years Later’, *McKinsey on Government* (No.5, Spring 2010), pp.70-75.
The July 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) was the point at which a fundamental transition took place in the UK’s strategic outlook. The confusion and lack of direction brought about by the collapse of the 20th century Cold War strategic order now gave way to a mood of cautious engagement with an emergent 21st century strategic order; one characterised by insecurity, diversity and urgency.

The SDR was significant for six themes, each of which has resonated powerfully in the UK national strategic debate ever since. The first of these was the Labour government’s determination to conduct a ‘foreign-policy led strategic defence review’: an acknowledgement that in the emerging international security order, in all its complexity, it made little sense for foreign policy and national defence to be considered as separate domains. The second theme was risk. The broad tone of the SDR was nothing if not cautious: ‘there is today no direct military threat to the United Kingdom or Western Europe. Nor do we foresee the re-emergence of such a threat. But we cannot take this for granted.’ Importantly, the argument advanced here was not that a defence posture of the Cold War style should therefore be maintained “just in case”, but that it was a ‘vital British interest’ that these benign trends should be encouraged by UK foreign policy. The implication for UK national strategy and defence was that it should move from ‘stability based on fear to stability based on the active management of these risks.”

The third theme of the SDR was ‘affordability’. The stated aim of the review was to ‘provide the country with modern, effective and affordable Armed Forces which meet today’s challenges but are also flexible enough to adapt to change.’ This cost-conscious mood would influence national strategy in two ways. In an era where no ‘existential’ threat to the UK could be identified, the defence budget would have to compete with many other demands on public expenditure. And in the uncertain times of the 21st century, spending on security and defence would be expected to provide a certain level of ‘future-proofing’ in equipment acquisition. Savings would also be achieved through technology, the fourth key theme, with the SDR calling for ‘much more precise application of force as a result of improvements in intelligence gathering, command and control and precision weapons.’ The fifth theme was alliance: ‘For the foreseeable future we envisage that the largest operation we might have to undertake would be involvement in a major regional conflict, whether as part of NATO or a wider international coalition.’

The sixth and final theme of the SDR was captured in the term ‘expeditionary’. The SDR promised ‘a fundamental reshaping of our armed forces’ resulting in a ‘modernised, rapidly deployable and better supported front line.’ Emphasis was laid on the effectiveness and efficiency of ‘joint’ forces. The SDR confirmed the decision to build two new aircraft carriers with which UK maritime power would shift from ‘large-scale maritime warfare and open ocean operations in the North Atlantic’ to ‘littoral operations and force projection’. The SDR stressed the need to be able to

29 SDR (1998), p.2 [emphasis added].
deploy land forces, making use of improved battlefield reconnaissance and intelligence capabilities and new platforms such as the Apache attack helicopter. Air power, too, would be geared to expeditionary operations: the need for both air superiority and air defence would remain, but the direct air defence of the UK would be at a lower priority.\(^\text{30}\) The UK’s expeditionary force posture also shaped the SDR’s Defence Planning Assumptions (DPAs) according to which the UK would either ‘respond to a major international crisis’ (ie a full-scale, tri-service commitment along the lines of the 1991 Gulf War) or ‘undertake a more extended overseas deployment on a lesser scale (as over the last few years in Bosnia) while retaining the ability to mount a second substantial deployment’. In the event of the latter, dual commitment the SDR would not expect ‘both deployments to involve warfighting or to maintain them simultaneously for longer than six months.’\(^\text{31}\)

**2002: SDR New Chapter**

No further, more formal account of the UK strategic outlook was published until the appearance, in July 2002 of a *New Chapter* to the SDR.\(^\text{32}\) The *New Chapter* was an acknowledgement both of the events of September 2001 and the phenomenon of organised international terrorism, and of the government’s determination *not* to hold a formal national strategy and defence review so soon after the 1998 SDR. The new focus on terrorism as a strategic threat did, however, prompt an important change of emphasis in the DPAs: ‘our analysis suggests that […] several smaller scale operations are potentially more demanding than one or two more substantial operations. And there are now signs that frequent, smaller operations are becoming the pattern.’\(^\text{33}\)


The expeditionary theme, coupled more closely to the idea of long-distance counter-terrorism and stabilisation missions, was taken up again in *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, the 2003 Defence White Paper. The White Paper was intended to build upon both the SDR and the *New Chapter* in order ‘to provide a comprehensive statement of Defence Policy and an assessment of the strategic environment in which our Armed Forces operate.’ The White Paper would be the ‘security and policy baseline against which future decisions will be made to enable the UK’s Armed Forces to meet the full range of tasks they can expect to undertake in future.’\(^\text{34}\) The document remained true to the expeditionary idea, albeit with a more pronounced counter-terrorist flavour than the SDR:

> We must extend our ability to project force further afield than the SDR envisaged. In particular, the potential for instability and crises occurring across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and the wider threat from international terrorism, will require us both to engage proactively in conflict prevention and be ready to contribute to short notice peace support and counter-terrorist operations.\(^\text{35}\)


\(^{33}\) *New Chapter* p.14, para 32.


The White Paper thus favoured more, lighter and smaller missions for the armed forces, preferably at some distance from the UK. This position was encapsulated in a subtle yet important shift in Defence Planning Assumptions. Although the White Paper insisted that ‘our forces must retain the capacity to undertake Large Scale operations at longer notice in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Gulf Region’, the UK’s underlying strategic intention was clear enough: ‘Multiple concurrent Small to Medium Scale operations will be the most significant factor in our force planning.’ The document continued: ‘We must therefore plan to support the three concurrent operations, of which one is an enduring peace support operation, that have become the norm in recent years.’ This was no minor reorganisation of existing military means: the 2003 Defence White Paper confirmed a significant change in strategic outlook as the UK began to focus more closely, and more explicitly, on ‘small wars’.

2010: National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review
The UK’s most recent, formal strategic review was published in 2010, in two parts: the National Security Strategy (NSS) published on 18 October and the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) published the following day.

The NSS was clear in one important respect: ‘we face no major state threat at present and no existential threat to our security, freedom or prosperity.’ Rather than large-scale, traditional threats, the authors of the NSS thought in terms of risk: ‘The risk picture is likely to become increasingly diverse. No single risk will dominate.’ In a three-tiered list of ‘Priority Risks’, the NSS set out a familiar mix of sub-strategic threats, in response to which UK conventional armed forces would most likely be used at long distance and at a relatively low scale. The four ‘Tier One’ risks were international terrorism; cyber attacks and cyber crime; a major accident or natural hazard; and an ‘international military crisis between states’ involving the UK and its allies.

Other than in the case of the ‘international military crisis between states’ (Tier One), and the increased risk of terrorism resulting from ‘major instability, insurgency or civil war overseas (Tier Two), the deployment of UK armed forces in the conventional role does not feature prominently in the first two tiers of NSS table of ‘Priority Risks’. Significantly, the possibility of a ‘major accident or natural hazard’ appears as the third of four Tier One risks (a higher priority, therefore, than the ‘international military crisis’), while the prospect of a ‘large-scale conventional military attack on the UK by another state’ appears only as a Tier Three risk.

In order to meet the wide and varied range of security risks and challenges set out in the NSS, the SDSR offered a new ‘strategic policy framework’ known as the

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39 NSS (2010), p.15, para. 1.11.
40 NSS (2010), p.18, para. 1.32.
41 NSS (2010), p.27.
‘adaptable posture’ which in its turn generated eight ‘national security tasks’, as follows:

1. Identify and monitor national security risks and opportunities.
2. Tackle at root the causes of instability.
3. Exert influence to exploit opportunities and manage risks.
4. Enforce domestic law and strengthen international norms to help tackle those who threaten the UK and our interests, including maintenance of underpinning technical expertise in key areas.
5. Protect the UK and our interests at home, at our border and internationally, to address physical and electronic threats from state and non-state sources.
6. Help resolve conflicts and contribute to stability. Where necessary, intervene overseas, including the legal use of coercive force in support of the UK’s vital interests, and to protect our overseas territories and people.
7. Provide resilience for the UK by being prepared for all kinds of emergencies, able to recover from shocks and to maintain essential services.
8. Work in alliances and partnerships wherever possible to generate stronger responses.\(^{42}\)

These eight tasks capture the wide-ranging and generally sober tone of both the NSS and the SDSR. Yet they cannot be said to narrowly concerned with hard power. Similarly, of the SDSR’s 35 ‘planning guidelines’, only eight are directly concerned with the traditional, conventional use of military power. And in keeping with the mood of caution and constraint, the SDSR’s Defence Planning Assumptions held to the pattern of the previous decade, expressing a preference for military deployments which would be either far away, fairly small or relatively brief. The DPAs gave the following options:

- an enduring stabilization operation at around brigade level (up to 6,500 personnel) with maritime and air support as required, \(\textit{while also conducting} \) one non-enduring complex intervention (up to 2,000 personnel) and one non-enduring simple intervention (up to 1,000 personnel); \(\textit{or alternatively} \)
- three non-enduring operations if we were not already engaged in an enduring operation; \(\textit{or} \)
- for a limited time, and with sufficient warning, committing all our effort to a one-off intervention of up to three brigades, with maritime and air support (around 30,000, two-thirds of the force deployed to Iraq in 2003).\(^{43}\)

Judging by the 2010 NSS and SDSR, the UK’s strategic outlook is one in which the country will encounter a wide variety of security risks and challenges, ranging from natural hazards such as flooding, to cyber crime, to humanitarian crises and more traditional defence tasks, yet stopping short of an ‘existential’ threat to the UK and its interests. Consequently, the UK’s armed forces are expected to undertake a wide variety of tasks, including early warning and intelligence gathering, aid to emergency organisations, the provision of a ‘defence contribution to UK influence’, and the projection of military power within the parameters of the 2010 DPAs.

\textbf{Assessment}

The purpose of this paper has been to chart the recent evolution of UK hard power in terms of four notional ‘performance indicators’. Operational Experience, the first indicator of hard power, is the only one to show sustained performance and some signs of an upward trend: over the period covered by this paper, and for several years previously, the UK acquired and has consolidated a very strong reputation in the

\(^{42}\) SDSR (2010), pp.10-12.
effective use of military force. The second indicator, Military Expenditure, has been relatively constant although there are concerns about the size of the UK defence budget in the near-term and about the ability to sustain the commitment to spend two per cent of GDP on defence. Military Capabilities, the third indicator, shows downward trends, at least in quantitative terms, with marked reductions in some sectors. A qualitative assessment of UK hard power would certainly be more useful than a simple exercise in counting numbers (of ships, vehicles, aircraft, troops etc.). But with methodologies as yet relatively under-developed, a qualitative assessment is beyond the scope of this paper. The final indicator is Strategic Intent. Here, the UK’s strategic rhetoric has been neither obviously ‘up’ nor ‘down’, yet it has very clearly shrunk.

I suggest four possible explanations for this mixed set of results. The first contender is that the evolution of UK hard power since 1998 has been driven largely by austerity, and remains so. By this view, the priority of successive governments has been simply to reduce the proportion of public expenditure devoted to defence as quickly as possible, accepting increased strategic risk in what is assumed generally to be a more benign world in order to concentrate on restoring the health of the national economy. The ‘peace dividend’ of the early post-Cold War period, the argument might continue, was therefore no passing craze: it outlasted the 1990s and endured until it could be reincarnated in the post-2007 mood of austerity. There is a convincing aspect to this argument – UK defence is in the grip of austerity budgeting and will remain so for years to come – but it also somewhat exaggerated. Throughout the period covered by this paper the UK government has, after all, spent a very great deal of public money on defence: UK defence spending has consistently exceeded the NATO commitment to spend a minimum of two per cent of GDP on defence, and the UK features very prominently in the international league table of defence expenditure and should continue to do so.

The second possible explanation is that in recent years there has been a quiet campaign within government to ‘design out’ the UK’s capacity to act militarily. The purpose of this supposed ‘anti-strategic’ effort has been, and remains, to dismantle UK hard power on the grounds that the capacity to intervene gave rise to the temptation to intervene, resulting in the deaths, injuries, expense and reputational damage to the UK caused by ‘Blair’s wars’, most notably in Afghanistan and Iraq. Certainly, there are persistent, muttered allegations around Whitehall of government ministers and senior officials who have taken it upon themselves to exclude hard power from the UK’s ‘strategic toolbox’ in preference for an emphasis on the so-called ‘soft power’ of diplomacy, trading relations and cultural interaction. By removing the capacity to act, the high-minded, internationalist, interventionist rhetoric of the government’s declared (albeit shrinking) strategic intent would thus become relatively risk- and cost-free, since little could ever be done about it. And although national defence would still consume a large share of public spending, that sum would be far less than the cost of going to war. This explanation is also unconvincing, however. Where defence, security and military matters are concerned, soft power is valid and valuable, but it is best seen as a proxy for hard power rather than a sufficient alternative to it. It requires very little understanding of security strategy to see that the result of a programme of self-emasculation by stealth would be for UK hard power to be replaced, not by soft power but by bluff, and there might be nothing more expensive than the insecurity which is exposed when a bluff is called. Fortunately, it
is barely conceivable that senior people charged with the national security of the UK could have adopted such a strategically irresponsible, politically dishonest and intellectually weak position.

If neither austerity nor ‘anti-strategy’ offer a convincing explanation for the evolution of UK hard power, there is a third alternative. The only clear ‘up arrow’ in the story of UK hard power over the past 15 years or so is the very high level of operational experience gained by UK armed forces. If UK armed forces have remained so effective even under conditions of austerity then it is at least possible that their success might, perversely, have worked against them by providing a disincentive for sustained investment in hard power, whether financial, intellectual or political.

Operational experience might also mask the fourth, most convincing, yet least attractive explanation for the current condition of UK hard power: strategic ambivalence. A less charitable version of the same explanation would be that where hard power is concerned the UK government is chronically confused. It cannot be said that the UK has altogether lost its interest in hard power. But neither can it be said with much confidence what that interest is: why should the UK remain interested in hard power? How important is hard power in the UK’s national strategic outlook? And is military expenditure seen as an obligation on government or as a burden to be offloaded whenever and wherever possible? Strategic ambivalence reveals a national strategic outlook which barely qualifies as such, where the aspiration is to commit as little as possible (politically and financially), while retaining the widest possible range of strategic options. Ambivalence can be seen on several levels: political, operational, financial, technological and even moral. Politically, the UK’s diminishing capacity for major operational deployments chimes with public antipathy towards large-scale military interventions yet, in a politically prudent way, does not remove that option altogether. The expeditionary rhetoric found in the NSS and SDSR of 2010, as in earlier statements of strategic intent, can therefore remain available to the UK’s national strategic leadership without, ideally, ever having to be tested.

Something of this mixed messaging can be found in a comment made by Philip Hammond, then Secretary of State for Defence, in oral evidence to the House of Commons Defence Select Committee in October 2013. Although, as we have seen, the importance of expeditionary operations has been stressed repeatedly in defence reviews and documents since 1998, Mr Hammond chose to make the following point: ‘It would be realistic of me to say that I would not expect – except in the most extreme circumstances – to see a manifestation of great appetite for plunging into another prolonged period of expeditionary engagement any time soon.’

In a similar vein, in August 2014 Prime Minister David Cameron published a newspaper article, the title of which described the Islamic State unequivocally as a ‘direct and deadly threat to Britain’. In the body of the article, IS was presented as a ‘clear danger to Europe and to our security’ which would require a ‘generational struggle against a poisonous and extremist ideology.’ If ever there was a moment to remember Lord Robertson’s words from SDR 1998 – In the post-Cold War world, we must be prepared to go to the crisis, rather than have the crisis come to us – surely

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this was that moment. Yet in the same article Mr Cameron also insisted that ‘we should avoid sending armies to fight or occupy.’ 45 Subsequent events and decisions have served only to deepen the sense of inconsistency and even confusion within UK government as to the role and the limits of UK hard power. The first such moment was the deployment of combat aircraft on reconnaissance and later (following the House of Commons vote on 26 September 2014 in which the Prime Minister once again described IS as a threat to the UK ‘directly’ while insisting that the government ‘will not deploy UK troops in ground combat operations’), on strike missions against IS. There have also been unconfirmed reports that UK Special Forces have been deployed to the region as well as rumours that British troops (perhaps in battalion strength) might be deployed to Jordan to train Syrian rebels in their struggle against IS. 46 And then, in a return to more ambitious language, during a press conference at the conclusion of the NATO Summit in Wales in early September 2014 Mr Cameron committed the UK to providing an all-arms battlegroup and a brigade headquarters to a new NATO Response Force. 47

Operationally, any adjustments in the UK’s expeditionary hard power could arguably be offset by improved competence in other areas, such as counter-terrorism and rescue operations, which are perceived by the public and the media to be serious national security tasks which are at the same time closer to home. Financially, the impressive reputation of the UK’s armed forces holds out the alluring possibility that further cuts might be made (especially in personnel) without any obvious loss of competence, particularly if the scale and duration of operations is to reduce. Technologically, reductions in bulk hard power might rationalise a shift to a more technologically-oriented posture involving intelligence, surveillance, precision strike, remotely-piloted air systems and so forth. These equipments and platforms are of interest not only because they are often less costly to operate than their conventional equivalents but also offer a degree of political deniability which is not so readily available when there are ‘boots on the ground’. Technological warfare might even be considered to be morally preferable in that it should mean fewer troops being exposed to the risks of combat.

In some respects, strategic ambivalence is to be welcomed, not least as an implicit acknowledgement of the strength of J.K Galbraith’s warning about over-confident forecasting. At its most constructive, ambivalence could be the epitome of a national strategy based on risk analysis and management: an approach which is most appropriate when national strategy must respond not only to a diverse range of security threats and challenges but also to scarcity and austerity. Yet where matters of hard power are concerned, a national strategy based on ambivalence and risk must be deliberate rather than accidental, and it must involve careful and difficult decisions

45 David Cameron, ‘Isil poses a direct and deadly threat to Britain’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 August 2014.
46 House of Commons, *Daily Hansard*, Friday 26 September 2014, column 1255: [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140926/debtext/140926-0001.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140926/debtext/140926-0001.htm)
48 ‘British troops set to train Syrians in fight against Isis’, *The Times*, 14 October 2014.
rather than expect to avoid them altogether. Least of all should those responsible for
national strategy expect to be able to commit or deploy hard power inconsistently or
on a whim. For a risk-based national strategy to be effective it cannot be done ‘on the
cheap’ (both financially and conceptually) but must require serious and constant
thought and investment in intelligence gathering, early warning, communications and
so on. It remains to be seen whether the UK government will continue to be
committed to the risk-based approach to national strategy launched in NSS 2010 and
whether it will be able to provide reasonably clear parameters as to what will, and will
not be expected of UK hard power.

Conclusion

The level of a country’s defence spending is of course a key indicator as to its hard
power posture. But how much should be spent? Without modern military capabilities
at appropriate strength there would, of course, be no hard power worthy of the name.
But what is ‘appropriate’? While budget and capability are both necessary
components of the national strategic process, neither can provide a sufficient rationale
for it. Neither budget nor capability can answer the most important question about
hard power: what is it for? The response to that question can only come from the
country’s strategic leadership and, while acknowledging that in present circumstances
there is unlikely to be a single, durable answer, the question must be answered as
comprehensively and consistently as possible.

In his first speech as Chief of the Defence Staff in December 2013, General Sir Nick
Houghton observed that ‘(UK) Defence has, for many years, certainly since the end of
the Cold War, and in strong international company within Europe, been managing the
decline of military hard power.’ But managed decline and decline are not the same
thing: there must be strategic capacity and purpose in whatever remains of the process
– however inevitable – of retrenchment and force restructuring. As the basis for
national strategy, ambivalence is no substitute for analysis and decision, and neither
can it offer a reassuring glimpse of the future: national strategy will continue to
require complex judgements to be made and periodically revised as circumstances
change. And it is unwise, finally, to expect to be ambivalent about everything in
national strategy, particularly hard power. National hard power either exists on a
militarily meaningful scale, or it does not; and it either has purpose, or it does not.

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50 Paul Cornish, Strategy in Austerity: the Security and Defence of the United Kingdom (London:
51 General Sir Nick Houghton, Chief of the Defence Staff, RUSI, 18 December 2013:
https://www.rusi.org/cdslectures/