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# Tackling Some Major Problems

The new Government will have to tackle many defence problems in the defence review. Our 'Contention' section highlights six that should not be forgotten: the future impact of today's decisions; the relationship between MoD and industry; the approach to mainline security; recognition of the importance of technology; the requirement for an integrated acquisition system; and the need to preserve funding for new equipment.

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## SHAPING THE FUTURE DEFENCE PROGRAMME

by Sir Jeremy Blackham

*Sir Jeremy Blackham is an independent defence commentator, and was previously Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Equipment Capability) and then UK President of EADS. Here he states his belief that we must take a different approach to the forthcoming defence review if we are to give our successors in 15 to 20 years' time a viable defence programme to carry out the essential tasks that will confront them.*

Defence planning is a matter of balancing risks and, especially today, of making tough choices between the relative severity and relative likelihood of different scenarios. Nothing about it is certain and any solution needs to be tested against more than one possible risk. Moreover, it is inevitably a long-term business.

### Approaches to a Defence Review

I am convinced that an approach to defence reviews which sets out, first, to establish the national aspirations of the UK, sometimes called "identifying the UK's role in the world", and then developing matching defence policies and force structures cannot succeed. It has consistently failed us as an approach since 1945. It will inevitably produce force structure aspirations well in excess of any likely budgetary allocation and, as a result, well displaced into the future, as the 1998 Strategic Defence Review demonstrated. And it will, as then, distract attention from the deeply serious behavioural and cultural problems that make the MoD comprehensively dysfunctional. If this approach cannot work, what are the alternatives?

Currently we are regularly presented with a choice between an assumption that Afghanistan is the model for most or all future combat (even though terrorism has been

going on for centuries), and provision against state-on-state conflicts, which the proponents of the first proposition are obliged to pooh-pooh since they have no solution to it. This manifests itself in conflict between the equipment, manpower, training and support needs of short-term activities and the long timescales inevitably required to purchase sophisticated ships, aircraft, heavy armour and surveillance systems. I do not think this can be resolved by the regularly repeated calls for (and indeed scope for) cheaper equipments more quickly.

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We need a different calculus which would set out to decide **not what we wish to be in the world, but what we confront**; to identify through ruthless applications of logic and economy the real existential threats to, and vulnerabilities of, the UK's territory, society, prosperity and way of life, of whatever type these threats might be, whether directly military, economic or disruption of materials necessary for our survival and prosperity – our permanent interests in fact. Our first call on resources must be to meet these; it is mandatory. I will return in a moment to what this provision should be. All other activities are, by definition, discretionary and transitory – including of course the present activity in Afghanistan. Such activity

must either be undertaken with the tools purchased for mandatory tasks or, if they are to be specifically provided for, this provision must be a second priority. This is an inversion of the approach frequently suggested at the moment. In our economic circumstances a choice between the two has to be made.

Of course I recognise that we are currently engaged in Afghanistan and must do all we can to emerge thence with the minimum actual and reputational damage although not, I suggest, at any cost. The issue is not whether we should support to the full our present campaign there, but whether we should base all our future military planning on an assumption that our forces should be shaped principally for this, even at the expense of other contingencies – whether indeed we should mortgage our future to this idea. Whatever choice we make, we shall be mortgaging some part of our future, our children's future and our grandchildren's future to it. The choice is not to be lightly undertaken.

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### **Resource Limitations**

We have to understand that there are severe financial, population and natural resource limits to our capability. This is for many of us (myself included) a profoundly traumatic realisation. The assumption that “we have to retain the capacity to act on our own” in circumstances short of a national existential threat is no longer an assumption we can make. We would not be the first nation to reach this realisation; I hope that we shall not realise this too late. The consequence of this is that we will always in any operation of significance be part of a coalition because we cannot do other. We will always be making a part contribution, which should be shaped in accordance with our view of what we can most helpfully and affordably bring to an alliance.

Of course we can improve the picture. Real self-discipline could be exercised by the Services and equipment purchased at a ‘good enough’ level with spiral acquisition genuinely prepared. Ministers and officials could have the cost of delayed or changed decisions publicly placed against their name – I have long thought that all government programmes should have an accountable person's name publicly attached. Harsh maybe, but effective. We can mandate the maturity of technology we are prepared to

use, and seriously consider offshore suppliers in many cases where we are not. We can be much more serious about using commercial practice and skills. There are ways to alleviate the cost problem, all requiring serious change in behaviours and accountabilities. But we must not persuade ourselves that they alone will get us out of the woods; the scale of the mismatch is too great for that. Tough choices cannot be avoided, and this is going to demand major reconstruction of the MoD senior management.

### **Reshaping the Defence Programme**

At any given moment we have to make do with what we have got. Wars are fought with equipment bought 10 to 15 years previously. Reshaping the defence programme is, despite the important recommendations of Bernard Gray, a long-term business against a strategic background which changes much more swiftly. We cannot adjust our programme to every turn of the security wheel – we have to take a longer-term view and constantly adapt the use of the equipment we have got. We have, to repeat myself, to assess accurately the principal risks and vulnerabilities faced by the UK, its prosperity and security – neither of these is any use without the other. Moreover, these risks and vulnerabilities are likely to be very similar to those faced by other comparable nations and so the scope, and need, for co-operation seems clear.

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What do we do about all this? Here I am rather taken by Professor Colin Gray's prescription and I would be inclined to say that we should do “a few big things well”. These things would, like the deterrent, be long-lasting and expensive, so there will certainly be few of them. But if this prescription were followed, I think that it would produce a rather different force structure than is currently envisaged, and it would limit or prevent the sort of regular short-term shifts so much proposed which are so disruptive to sensible planning, wasteful, lacking in continuity and unlikely to be achieved in a short timescale. We need constantly to remember that today's decisions are bequeathing a force structure to our successors in 10 to 15 years' time in a world we cannot imagine. Those successors are today's military and civil middle management, and that is why they are often frustrated and disappointed. ■