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A Force for Order

Strategic Underpinnings of the Next NSS and SDSR

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The fundamental – or 'grand strategic' – objectives that underpin UK foreign and defence policy remain as valid as ever. But their application needs to be adapted to changing circumstances in the next National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).

Grand Strategy

The starting point for this year's NSS should be the grand strategy on which UK foreign and security policy has been based since the late 1940s. Prior to 1939, the UK pursued a predominantly nationalist grand strategy, based on the assumption that the country had no permanent allies outside the Empire and Commonwealth. Since the formation of NATO in 1949, by contrast, UK grand strategy has consistently been based on a permanent alliance and economic partnership with fellow democracies in the US and Western Europe, and on support for the rules-based international order created after 1945. Domestic support for this internationalist grand strategy was sustained (both in the UK and elsewhere in Europe) by continuing improvements in economic and social welfare. These gains helped to marginalise radical political voices, on both the left and right, who favoured a return to more nationalist approaches.

Within this shared framework, the UK has sought to maintain its ability to exert disproportionate influence over collective strategies and decisions, at both alliance and global levels. There have been continuing debates about the form that the UK's contribution should take: the balance between European and Atlantic partnerships; the emphasis given to the Commonwealth; how far sovereignty should be shared in order to strengthen international co-operation; and the level of resources that can be devoted to the tools of policy (especially military power). But these debates have been conducted within a broad consensus that the UK should remain committed to the post-

1945 international order, and that it should seek to play a disproportionate role in upholding and shaping that order.

This grand strategy has been largely successful, helping to ensure a period of prosperity and security unprecedented in the nation's history. Its place as a permanent member of the UN Security Council remains secure, as does its ability to help shape international affairs across a wide range of issue areas. Throughout the quarter-century since the end of the Cold War, moreover, the UK has been the US's most important ally in successive military operations. In many of these operations – including Kosovo in 1999, southern Afghanistan after 2006 and Libya in 2011, as well as the decision not to attack Syria in 2013 – the UK demonstrated that its own actions could affect (for good or ill) the direction of US and NATO policy. This degree of influence is in turn underpinned by the world's fourth- (or, on some estimates, the fifth-) largest defence budget, the second-largest aid budget, and its special intelligence relationship with the US. While no longer a superpower (a position it lost in the 1940s), the UK remains much more than a 'middle power'.

Yet the UK's ability to maintain this favourable strategic position is now facing a level of strain not seen since the end of the Cold War. Together with its Western allies, it is facing multiple challenges from rising levels of instability and conflict across the wider Middle East, increasing levels of Russian assertiveness in its European neighbourhood and the possible implications of the continuing rise of Chinese power. Not least, the extended after-effects of the financial crisis mean that political developments in NATO and EU member states (including in the UK itself) could themselves be a source of geostrategic risk.

Concern that the US might execute a major rebalancing of its security commitments towards the Asia-Pacific at the expense of Europe and the Middle East has been a recurring theme in the European security debate since the 1950s. But it remains highly unlikely that the US will abandon its leading security role on either continent, given the centrality of both commitments to its position as a global superpower. Certainly, President Barack Obama – in his second term – has been more reluctant to commit US forces to large-scale military operations than his immediate predecessor. Yet this shift does not presage a shift towards US isolationism. Congressional support for a global military role remains strong; and the most plausible candidates to succeed President Obama in January 2017, both Democrat and Republican, are likely to be more hawkish and more committed to the use of military force to support traditional allies.

While international alliances and regimes remain vital, countering direct security threats to the UK mainland itself is still primarily a national responsibility. One of the important strategic judgements for the NSS and

SDSR, therefore, will be whether the right balance has been struck between national protective capabilities and the UK's contribution to international peace and security. Some of those involved in the SDSR debate are already arguing in favour of devoting more resources to protecting UK-based individuals and assets against serious sub-conventional threats, including terrorism, organised crime and state-sponsored cyber-penetrations – if necessary, at the expense of military capabilities for power projection.

Implications for the NSS and SDSR

Whatever budgetary settlement the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is able to obtain in the 2015 Spending Review, capability planning requires clarity on both national objectives and on the role of military force in pursuing those objectives. Given the uncertainties of the international environment, assumptions on the latter are bound to remain provisional and contingent. Even so, some basic principles – both thematic and regional – can be outlined.

1. Be a 'Force for Order'

One of the key starting points for assessing the future role of UK armed forces must be an understanding of the benefits gained (or not gained) from their recent deployment, which in turn should inform how they might be used in the future.

A 2014 assessment of the most important UK military operations of the post-1990 period, published by RUSI, suggested that only five (out of ten) were clear strategic successes.[1] The clearest successes, it argued, were two 'Force for Order' operations: the 1991 campaign to reverse Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait, and the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks on the US. Both operations were in direct response to grave breaches of international law, were supported by a wide international coalition (including the UN Security Council), and had clear, and limited, operational objectives. The preservation of a rules-based international order is a fundamental UK interest, and is central to its grand strategy. Sustaining this order will continue to depend on the willingness of states, *in extremis*, to use military force to protect it.

The importance of UK armed forces as a Force for Order extends beyond their use in major military operations. It includes their peacetime deployment to defend norms of international society, such as freedom of movement on the high seas and in international airspace, and to help deter breaches of these norms. Arguably, it should also include a greater willingness to support UN peacekeeping missions; it remains a significant weakness of today's

1. Malcolm Chalmers, 'The Strategic Scorecard: Six out of Ten', in Adrian Johnson (ed.), *Wars in Peace: British Military Operations since 1991* (London: RUSI, 2014), pp. 89–136. The study's assessment of the Kosovo intervention was that it was only a questionable success.

international system that military operations mandated and financed by the UN Security Council receive so little operational support from the most capable military powers.

In contrast to the success of the two Force for Order operations, military operations designed to transform foreign societies – in Iraq after 2003 and in southern Afghanistan after 2006 – turned out to be strategic failures. Their offensive character reflected the dominant strategic narrative of the time, already evident by the time of the 1999 Kosovo War but greatly reinforced by the shock of the 9/11 attacks. Yet it proved to be much more difficult than anticipated to change the nature of other societies through external military intervention. In a further breach of Force for Order principles, both the Kosovo and Iraq wars were launched without authorisation from the UN Security Council, undermining US and UK claims to be defenders of international law, and contributing to the subsequent worsening of NATO–Russian relations. Even if the Kosovo campaign can still be justified because of its success in limiting a mounting humanitarian disaster, these wider consequences need to be weighed in the balance in assessing its strategic value.

Based on the lessons of the last two decades, therefore, military operations are more likely to succeed if they have clear and limited objectives, and are conducted under international law and in support of accepted international norms. By contrast, where military force is used as an instrument for societal transformation, and in the face of opposition from other major powers, it is more likely to fail.

Looking forward, this suggests that being a Force for Order is a more credible role for the armed forces than continuing to use them as a Force for Change, deployed to overthrow hostile regimes and directly build new states.

Such a change in emphasis is relevant to both of the great security challenges facing European governments: the multiple, and interrelated, conflicts now burning across the wider Middle East; and Russia's increasingly aggressive, and unpredictable, behaviour on NATO's eastern flank.

2. Help Build Peace in the Wider Middle East

There is now a wide arc of conflicts stretching from the Sahel and Libya, through southern Sudan and Somalia, from Yemen to Syria and Iraq, and over to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Each conflict, while distinct, is linked to others through a complex mix of regional alliances and international jihadist networks, sectarian solidarities and economic interdependence.

Conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan and South Sudan were already underway in 2010. While some have taken new forms since then (for example in South Sudan), none have been resolved. And new

countries previously free of war, most notably Syria and Libya, have become the site for large-scale deaths and atrocities, and apparently little prospect of a negotiated peace in the short term. The most deadly armed conflicts in the world today are almost all in this wider Middle East region (Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, the Democratic Republic of the Congo are the main exceptions). Most of the rest of the world – the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, even much of sub-Saharan Africa – has enjoyed a relatively pacific decade.[2]

Events in the wider Middle East matter to the UK. Jihadist-inspired terrorist threats within the UK have grown as a direct result of the war in Syria. As conflicts spread and worsen, millions of people are fleeing Syria, Libya, Somalia and other war zones to seek safety further north. State fragility on Europe's southern border facilitates the growth of organised crime, posing further challenges for Europe's internal security. UK economic interests are also at stake – such as its strong trade and investment links, the large population of UK citizens in the Gulf, and oil-supply predictability. Not least, the spread of conflict is leading to human suffering on a massive scale, and the UK has a moral responsibility to do what it can to help.

Yet, even as the scale of conflict in the region has grown, the US and its allies have lost confidence in their ability to transform foreign societies, and have found – most recently in Libya – that attempts to use military force as a Force for Good in response to humanitarian emergencies can be counterproductive in their longer-term effect.

As a result, the main focus of Western military efforts in the region has shifted from societal transformation to creating the space for resolution of conflicts (within and potentially between states). While regional powers are drawn into one side or another of the wars in Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, the UK and its Western allies have emphasised the need for negotiated and inclusive settlements. This has still often involved providing help to one party in these conflicts, including the Shia-dominated government in Iraq, and, most recently, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. But this has been accompanied with efforts, sometimes unwelcome to these partners, to press for outreach and reconciliation with opposing forces.

This shift, if sustained, has significant implications for the type of military forces that are needed to support Western political objectives in the region. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the US and the UK needed personnel-intensive capabilities that could overthrow hostile regimes and support a process of externally driven societal transformation.

2. Lotta Themner and Peter Wallensteen, 'Armed Conflicts 1946–2013', *Journal of Peace Research* (Vol. 51, No. 4, July 2014), pp. 541–54.

An approach that focuses on the need to support local and regional peace settlements, by contrast, requires more emphasis on supporting local political and security actors. At every stage – as the battle over Tikrit in early 2015 demonstrated once more – the political shape of the winning coalition is just as important as victory itself. It is an approach in which there are few permanent regional allies, and in which the West's main interest is in conflict resolution and stability.

Within this political framework, the focus of military effort shifts towards supporting local and regional allies with training, air power and special forces. Direct 'counter-terrorist' action remains important in relation to the specific problem of jihadist groups that pose a threat to Western homelands. In relation to the broader conflicts in each of these countries, however, local actors must be in the lead.

This new emphasis does not make political success more certain, not least because local allies rarely share all of the objectives of the UK and its Western allies. While the preference of outsiders may be to seek reconciliation and power-sharing between ethnic and confessional groups, as well as between major regional powers, this objective is not always shared by those most directly involved in conflict. Local allies are not proxies for Western powers, but driven by their own political agendas. Attempts to create local auxiliary forces – most recently in US-led efforts to train anti-Daesh Syrian fighters – seem doomed to fail unless linked much more clearly to the internal Syrian political leadership.

This emerging approach – driven both by the lessons learned from recent conflicts and by shifts in US policy – has important implications for UK capabilities. Because of its focus on the need for local and regional solutions, it places greater emphasis on the need for persistent defence engagement by UK military forces, in which the development of long-term relationships is often as important as the specific training, commercial and capacity-building content. Because such engagement is so important in the capacity-building of the UK's own forces, its core elements cannot be subcontracted to private security companies. If the UK is serious about its military having a role in shaping local conflicts – and in helping to prevent conflict – it needs to be willing to take the calculated risks that the deployment of small numbers of personnel into dangerous countries can involve. It also needs to invest in the development of the new skill sets required – including linguistic, cultural and historical understanding.

Even as this shift may generate savings in some areas, it could point to doing more in others. It may, for example, suggest that the UK should be prepared to do more to support UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. These missions now play a critical role in stabilisation and conflict prevention throughout

the continent. But their effectiveness could be greatly enhanced by access to the enabling capabilities that only more developed military powers, such as the UK, can bring. Increased support for such missions would provided reputational dividends, helping to offset the perception that the UK has lost the will to play its part internationally.

The emergence of this new approach also suggests that the MoD will need to invest more in the support capabilities for running a relatively large number of small operations, at the expense if necessary of the capability to support a single large Helmand-scale garrison. The chair of the House of Commons Defence Committee, Rory Stewart MP, has recently argued that 'we might be needed in a dozen different theatres, concurrently.'[3]

While an approach focused on support to local allies now predominates in the thinking of Obama's second-term presidency, this could change in future. The absence of a credible threat of direct Western intervention appears to be encouraging regional military powers – Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as Iran – to take more direct military action themselves. As the independent role of such powers grows, the risk of some fundamental breaches of international rules is increasing – attempts to block international sea-lanes, perhaps even further attempts to change borders by force. The UK and its allies therefore still need to be prepared for Force for Order operations in response to such threats. There may also be other circumstances – for example a new large-scale terrorist atrocity in the US – in which an American president would authorise a regime-changing invasion.

In approaching the next SDSR, this leaves the question of how much provision for such a contingency – potentially involving large-scale regime change and occupation – should be made, relative to other priorities. What is clear is that the UK would only take part in such an operation, above a rather low threshold, if it were led by the US or as part of a broad European coalition. Given this, it probably makes sense for capabilities (including levels of readiness) required primarily for such operations to be given a relatively lower priority at this time.

3. Deter Russia

Deterrence plays a central role in making a reality of a Force for Order posture. It is an inherently conservative concept, seeking to demonstrate to those who might consider breaching international norms that the costs of doing so would exceed any possible gain. In order to achieve this perceptual effect, it

3. Parliament.uk, 'Defence Plans No Longer Address New Threats', press release, 24 March 2015, for House of Commons Defence Committee, *Re-Thinking Defence to Meet New Threats,* HC 254 (London: Stationery Office, 2015).

requires both an appropriate range of military capabilities and a demonstrable willingness to deploy them to prevent and punish any aggression.

In the wars of the last two decades, deterrence was less relevant to Western practice. The purpose of successive campaigns in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq was to change regimes and then oversee the creation of new political settlements on the ground. But such objectives are not appropriate in relation to Russia, and NATO has made it very clear that regime change is not part of its agenda towards that country.

Russian leaders are not reassured by such statements. One of the lessons that Russia drew from NATO's Kosovo War in 1999 was that the commitment of Western states to a rules-based international order only applied in cases where it suited them. Only military power, its new generation of leaders believed, could safeguard Russia from suffering the fate of Serbia or Iraq.

In part because of its awareness of such Russian concerns, NATO has always made clear that deployments in its newer member states would remain limited and defensive in character. This commitment was enshrined in the NATO–Russia Founding Act and, even today, has led to limits on permanent basing in Poland and the Baltic republics.

With relations between NATO and Russia now at a post-1990 low, the experience of the Cold War may hold important lessons for policy-makers. During the earliest and most dangerous phase of the Cold War, the risks of war were increased by continuing ambiguity over where the 'red lines' of the two superpowers lay, and helped precipitate the Korean War in 1950. Continuing ambiguity also contributed to the Berlin and Cuban crises, in 1961 and 1962, which brought the world closer than ever before (or since) to a general nuclear war. Given such risks, the central role of NATO military forces in relation to Russia – as in the Cold War – must continue to be to contribute to war prevention.

Yet Russia is now much weaker in military terms than during the Cold War. Not only is the border with NATO on its own frontiers, rather than in the middle of Germany; its conventional forces are now much less capable, and smaller, than those of NATO. While it has increased its defence budget sharply over the last decade, its total defence budget for 2014 was only $70 billion, one seventh of that of the US and significantly less than the combined budgets of the UK and France.[4] Two decades of neglect have left its conventional

4. In 2014, Russia spent $70 billion on its military, compared with $581 billion for the US, $62 billion for the UK, and $53 billion for France. IISS, *The Military Balance 2015* (London: Routledge/IISS, 2015). Given the collapse of the rouble's value against the dollar, Russia's 2015 budget in dollar terms will be significantly less, though in rouble terms it continues to increase.

forces reliant on large inventories of vintage equipment, with relatively small stockpiles of modern aircraft, ships and helicopters. A large proportion of its recent spending increase has been devoted to the modernisation of Russia's strategic nuclear force, slowing the rate at which new resources have been devoted to conventional modernisation. This conventional weakness in turn feeds Russian paranoia, along with the increasingly shrill nuclear threats against NATO states that have been issued by senior officials.

As part of this renewed emphasis on nuclear intimidation, Russia has deployed its nuclear-capable bomber aircraft on growing numbers of long-distance patrols, testing NATO air defences and sending loud political messages. Yet these deployments have also revealed Russian weaknesses. If there were to be a conventional war with NATO, the small Russian force of modern aircraft would be rapidly depleted by NATO's larger and much more capable fleet.[5] Within weeks, if not days, NATO's superiority in the air and at sea would become clear, with devastating results for the Russian military. It could take longer to mobilise NATO forces on the ground to reverse any territorial gains which Russia might have made in a surprise attack. But the eventual outcome of a war between NATO and Russia, if confined to the conventional level, is hardly in doubt.

In response to NATO's latent conventional superiority, Russia has compensated by focusing on capabilities in which it can still gain an edge, and to which Western countries find it much harder to respond. In addition to its focus on nuclear forces, it has devoted considerable energy to developing 'sub-conventional' capabilities: special forces for political subversion and sabotage in neighbouring states, offensive cyber-capabilities designed to acquire industrial secrets and take down critical military and civilian infrastructure, and large intelligence operations in foreign capitals. Countering these efforts, often through the further development of the UK's own sub-conventional capabilities, is one of the most important tasks of security planners.

Russia's relative conventional weakness means that it makes little sense for the UK to move back to its Europe-focused defence posture of the 1970s and 1980s. During the late 1960s, under pressure to cut public spending even as Soviet conventional forces grew in capability, the UK rightly chose to sacrifice its 'out-of-area' commitments in the Gulf and Southeast Asia in order to focus on preserving its commitments to Europe's defence in the North Atlantic and on the central front in Germany. Such a shift today, by contrast, would risk undermining the important contribution that UK forces can continue to play in other regions where they can make a difference.

5. For example, see: Matthew Bodner, 'Russia's Bombers over Europe are Scary, but not in the Way You Think', *Moscow Times*, 3 April 2015.

In response to the need to deter further Russian aggression, the UK has contributed air assets to patrolling tasks in NATO's front-line states, as well as deploying ground forces to relevant exercises and to NATO's new forward command centres. There will be a continuing role for the UK in this regard, including as one of the framework nations for the generation of response forces.

As in the Cold War, however, the UK is not well placed to play the predominant European role in this theatre. Rather, to the extent that a more robust conventional deterrent posture is required, it makes more sense for others to play the lead European role in NATO territorial defence, allowing those more willing to deploy forces outside Europe – including the UK and France – to continue to fulfil a wider range of responsibilities. This would be consistent with West Germany's historic role as a Europe-focused military power during the Cold War. It fits with Germany's particular interest in the stability of its immediate neighbourhood, already reflected in Chancellor Angela Merkel's leading role in recent diplomacy over the Ukrainian crisis. After years of relative neglect, Germany is now planning increases in defence spending, together with a central role in support of new NATO command centres in Eastern Europe. Poland can also play a key role in this respect, given both its geographical position and its substantial and growing defence budget.

4. Be Cautious about a UK Military Pivot to Asia

No relationship is more important to the future of international peace and security than the one between the US and China. More broadly, the UK has a strong interest in helping to ensure that China's growing power contributes to international stability rather than undermine it. A modest UK military presence in Asia can play some role in supporting these objectives. Thus, for example, the UK continues to have a military presence in Southeast Asia, in support of the Five Powers Defence Arrangement and in recognition of its special ties with Australia and New Zealand. At a relatively modest cost, active defence engagement (including training and other capacity-building activities) can also help to strengthen UK diplomatic ties with Asian states such as India, Indonesia and Japan, which are likely to be of growing strategic importance in the decades to come.

Yet the costs of more substantial UK military commitments to this region could be high, both because of the inherent difficulties of maintaining long-range support at such a distance and because of the growing sophistication of the capabilities which potential regional adversaries are deploying. In a future regional crisis, it could be useful for the UK to be able to deploy a modest force in order to show solidarity with the US. Making the additional investments that would be needed for the UK to play a much more substantial role than currently planned, however, should not be a high priority in the next SDSR.

5. Maintain a Broad Force Spectrum and Quality, even at the Expense of Mass

For any given budget, defence planners must make a trade off between three variables: the width of the spectrum of UK capabilities, the quality of the forces in each element of that spectrum and their numerical strength.

The centrality of alliances to the UK's grand strategy has meant, up to now, that spectrum and quality have (by and large) been maintained at the expense of mass. Considerations of 'critical mass' remain important in terms of cost-effectiveness, given the inefficiencies that can be involved in operating smaller forces. But the operational risks involved in limited mass – including declining abilities to conduct simultaneous operations and to replace losses – are mitigated by the assumption that NATO allies (most of all, the US) would be available to fill any gaps. Despite inflated media rhetoric, defence planners do not believe that it makes sense to compare the size of Britain's army today to its level at the time of Cromwell or the Boer War.

The trend towards lower numbers is likely to continue. The UK will continue to invest a high proportion of its budget in new enabling capabilities and front-line equipment, giving its future aircraft and ships a level of capabilities much greater than the platforms they replace. Given the limited resources available, and continuing growth in unit costs for these new capabilities, however, the size of forces (measured in planes, ships or people) is likely to become progressively smaller over time.

By investing in new forms of capability, the UK will continue to have an ability to deploy globally that few other states possess, together with access to capabilities that can deliver historically unprecedented levels of military effect. But the price of this qualitative edge will be such that, in most mid or high level scenarios, the leadership of a larger ally (i.e., the US) will continue to be needed. In the context of wider grand strategy, this is a constraint that the UK has long since accepted as part of its wider internationalist strategy.

On this argument, the maintenance of highly capable, albeit smaller, forces should help the UK to continue to be the US's single most influential security partner. By possessing a wide spectrum of capabilities, the UK can maximise its ability to shape international and coalition debates to reflect its own interests and values. Within this spread it also makes sense for the UK to play to its comparative advantages in those areas (and regions) in which it is one of only a small number of allies able to make a significant contribution – for example in high-end SSNs, surveillance aircraft, world-class intelligence services and special forces, and active UN Security Council engagement.

The importance of political symbolism in defence reviews suggests that the government should also be cautious before repeating the 2010 SDSR's

decision to accept gaps in important capabilities in order to retain the resources to develop more capable successor systems. While this argument may have made technical and economic sense, in relation to the decisions to retire both the Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) and scrap the last *Invincible*-class aircraft carriers, it proved very hard to explain to a wider public. With new MPA and carrier capabilities likely to enter service before 2020, moreover, they will need additional resources of both cash and relevant trained personnel. One of the key objectives for the SDSR will be to find ways of introducing these new capabilities, while minimising and spreading the financial burden of doing so.

The UK's new aircraft carriers and the surface fleet more generally provide a useful illustration of how UK grand strategy might play into specific procurement decisions.

The introduction of the first carrier into service in or around 2018 will require significant additional resources, even as defence provision as a whole is under strain. But the extent of the additional demands placed on the recurrent budget will depend on decisions still to be made on how the carrier capability is to be used and what additional support capabilities will be acquired in order to increase its effectiveness.

At one end of the spectrum, the UK could aim to deploy a carrier capability equivalent to that of a US carrier battle group, supported by a range of additional naval assets (logistics vessels, SSNs, air-defence destroyers and frigates), as well as a substantial on-board contingent of fixed and rotary wing aircraft, able to deploy even in the most dangerous areas of the world without support from allies. But no other carrier-equipped middle power is able to afford such a high-end capability, and it is highly doubtful that the UK will be the exception.

In line with the broad principles set out above, it may be more realistic to limit the carrier's ability for entirely independent action primarily to those environments in which it is not necessary to deploy a top-end capability. When deployed to more difficult areas such as the Gulf, the carrier would be deployed primarily as a contribution to an integrated, and US-led, capability. Recent reports that the US Marine Corps will use the UK's carriers as a platform for their new F-35Bs should be welcomed as a useful precedent in this regard. If the carrier is seen as part of the UK's contribution to integrated alliance forces, it could also provide greater flexibility in relation to the role of the second carrier, the number and type of embarked aircraft and other capabilities, and the necessity for a full package of escort ships. Such an 'alliance configuration' would still leave the UK with one of the world's three most-powerful carrier fleets well into the 2020s.

The SDSR will also need to review the balance of capabilities across the surface fleet. With the projected unit costs of the new Type 26 Global Combat Ship now thought to exceed £600 million, it seems increasingly likely that it will not be possible to replace the thirteen existing Type 23 frigates on a one-to-one basis. The primary reason for this cost growth has been the decision to ensure that the new vessel is optimised for global operations, with high levels of adaptability built into its design. As with other high-end UK capabilities, the result of this qualitative enhancement is likely to be a further reduction in escort numbers, continuing the long-established historical trend. As with the carrier, the choice makes more sense insofar as the surface fleet is seen primarily as a contribution to a wider alliance effort, albeit with important additional national responsibilities.

6. Develop a New Approach to NATO Burden-sharing

The next NSS will also need to reflect on NATO's burden-sharing bargain, and in particular to consider whether it is now time to move beyond the 2-per-cent target that has been seen as the main indicator of success in this regard for the last decade.[6]

The Atlantic Alliance has done itself serious reputational damage by giving so much emphasis to a target that so few of its member states have managed to meet. In 2013, only four countries out of twenty-eight met the target of spending at least 2 per cent of their national income on defence, fewer than the six countries that met the target in 2006. The majority of non-performers will soon be joined by the UK, which is due to fall below the target in 2016/17 – and may even do so in 2015/16.[7] Far from being an instrument for the promotion of NATO cohesion and greater effort by member states, the 2-per-cent target has now become increasingly counterproductive, undermining mutual confidence between the US and its European allies.

A mature burden-sharing debate within NATO is needed. But it cannot be based primarily on crude top-down numerical targets. Rather, it must be based on a more bottom-up approach, in which all member states have an obligation to take part in all significant NATO operations, but in which the specific nature of their contribution beyond this should be sensitive to their own national situation. Thus, for example, it makes sense for Italy and Spain to focus on capabilities of greatest relevance to the Mediterranean, while Poland and Germany focus more on their own neighbourhood.

6. For further discussion, see Malcolm Chalmers, 'Defence Spending – Beyond the 2 per Target?', Carnegie Europe, March 2015, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=59577>.
7. Malcolm Chalmers, 'Mind the Gap: The MoD's Emerging Budgetary Challenge', RUSI Briefing Paper, March 2015.

For the UK, the size of its defence budget, together with its broader geopolitical aspirations, means that it is able to make a more potent and flexible contribution to NATO than any other single European country (though France runs it close). With its resources limited, however, the next SDSR will need to ensure that effort is focused in those areas where they are needed most, not least in those where there are few other European states able or willing to help.

Just as important, the NSS and SDSR will need to consider how to overcome the growing perception that the UK is now markedly more reluctant to deploy force than in the past. Recent examples of this trend include the 2013 parliamentary vote against joining military action against Syria, the near-complete withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of 2014 (leaving Germany and Italy deploying larger forces), the reluctance to deploy trainers to the south of Iraq, and the failure to provide significant assistance to France on the ground in Mali or in support of the recent campaign against Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. While each of these was explicable in its own terms, the overall impression that the UK has allowed to spread is that – after the traumas of Iraq and Afghanistan – it is becoming quite comfortable with punching well below the weight that its position as the world's fourth- (or fifth-) largest military spender might suggest.

Holding Our Nerve

This is a difficult moment for the UK and its allies. For much of the post-Cold War era, it seemed that democratic forces were gaining strength across the world, with significant advances in Latin America, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and much of Asia. The so-called Arab Spring briefly kindled hopes that the Middle East, the region that had hitherto been largely untouched by this trend, might soon be about to join it. Today, by contrast, that trend has halted. In its place, Europe feels increasingly embattled: by the protracted after-effects of the financial crisis at home, and the political nationalism and fragmentation that it has engendered; and by the worsening crises on both its southern and eastern borders, which Europe and its allies seem powerless to resolve.

The UK and its allies must brace themselves for the possibility that some of these trends could worsen further in coming years. In doing so, however, they should not exaggerate their weaknesses. History remains on their side. Although the quiet advance of human development and democratisation generates few headlines, it nevertheless continues in much of the developing world. Neither Putin's Russia nor any of the competing jihadists of the Middle East have anything like the ability that the Soviet Union had to threaten the security of the West.

The Western alliance therefore needs to hold its collective nerve, adopting a robust but calm approach to each new challenge, continuing to be the key anchor around which international order is maintained, while seeking to build the new partnerships that will be needed in response to the continuing shift of global economic power towards Asia.

Most of all, the UK needs to work to maintain and strengthen the partnerships on which its security and prosperity depends. The grand strategy which it adopted in the 1940s, anchored on a community of fate between the countries of Europe and North America, remains the right one for the country today. Those who argue for a return to nationalism, and for a fragmentation of European institutions, remain on the fringes of politics. As long as these institutions remain there, there is every prospect that the UK and its allies can come successfully through this difficult period.

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