

Written evidence from James de Waal, Chatham House

## **Military capability**

**Does the UK have the equipment, personnel, infrastructure and skills to implement the military strategy set out in the SDSR?**

• **Are the military capabilities listed in the SDSR affordable given the current scale of defence spending? [If not, what percentage of GDP might the UK need to spend on defence to achieve those capabilities?]**

Government officials involved in developing the SDSR insist that the costs have been carefully calculated and are affordable on the basis of the financial settlement set out in the Spending Review. Two areas of potential risk are:

- the ambitious level of savings – some £9.2bn – necessary to keep with the budget ceiling. These include savings in such complex and politically-sensitive areas as forces pay and equipment procurement;
- the low level of “spare capacity” in the force structure which could allow for flexibility and resilience in unexpected emergencies.

It is important to note that the alternative to increasing spending to achieve capabilities is to reduce the level of commitments. This should also always be considered as an option.

**The National Security Strategy states that “our Armed Forces increase our influence in regions that matter to us.” What do our partners and competitors actually think of the current scale and capabilities of the UK Armed Forces?**

• **Is the National Security Strategy/SDSR likely to change their view?**

Some of Britain’s allies – including in the US and French governments – seem to have been favourably impressed by the SDSR, notably by the increase in spending and the expansion of military capabilities envisaged. Some US officials seem to have been expecting further capability cuts and were pleasantly surprised when none were announced. This contributes to a sense that “Britain is back” after the cuts of 2010.

However we should be very cautious about drawing firm conclusions on this subject:

- “influence” is an inexact term, and is not defined in detail by the government, which also does not set out clear and measurable targets in the SDSR for the level of influence it hopes to attain;
- there is no provable direct linkage between a certain level of military or security capability and a certain level of military or political influence;
- “influence” and other similar concepts such as reputation, prestige and credibility are perceived very differently by different audiences (even within a single government), for a wide range of different reasons, and can change rapidly depending on circumstances;

- perceptions are not necessarily correct. For example the suggestion that the 2015 SDSR represented a major shift in the UK's approach neglects the significant continuities between the 2010 and 2015 reviews.
- military success is often a determining factor in military reputation; it is not the level of force which counts but its effective use to achieve justifiable and worthwhile ends. This of course goes far beyond issues purely of military force structure, and is an area where the UK has not scored highly recently;
- the UK has historically had ambitious and sometimes unrealistic aspirations for the influence it can gain through its military power, which have often shaped its military strategy. For example the governments at the time justified the UK contribution to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2006 deployment to Helmand in part on the grounds that these commitments would influence US policy, expectations which were not achieved in reality. Caution is therefore advisable.

**On the face of it, Joint Force 2025 would give the UK a true expeditionary capability. Why might the UK require such a capability?**

The principal argument for such a capability is that the expeditionary use of military force helps deal with transnational security threats to the UK at a distance, rather than just defending at home. This argument is often used, for example, to make the case for military interventions against terrorist safe havens or sources of inspiration abroad, rather than just depending on domestic intelligence and police work.

The costs and benefits of this expeditionary approach were however not re-examined in the 2015 SDSR. The SDSR asserts that this is the right policy for Britain, but provides no concrete evidence to support this judgement, or why an alternative domestic strategy would not be more cost-effective.

**The NSS states that “The UK’s independent nuclear deterrent will remain essential to our security today, and for as long as the global situation demands.” [That statement has recently been subject to political challenge for the first time in a generation.] Are there sound strategic arguments for re-examining the case for nuclear deterrence?**

The NSS offers very little evidence for its assertions about the value of UK nuclear weapons. For example it does not explain why it is necessary for the UK to possess such weapons when so many other countries do not, nor why it is necessary to have an independent supplement to the US nuclear guarantee. It does not mention the issue of national prestige, which has been an essential element of UK nuclear policy since Britain's original acquisition of nuclear weapons on 1953. Helpfully, the NSS does not deploy the false argument that the UK's Permanent Seat on the UN Security Council is dependent on its continued possession of nuclear weapons.

The NSS implies that Russian actions are again a principal driver for UK nuclear policy, but does not set out an effective approach to dealing with Russian nuclear policy. Current Russian policy seems aimed at exploiting differences between NATO allies in order to weaken and fragment the alliance, in particular by using nuclear sabre-rattling to expose

differences within NATO on nuclear issues. This is a very specific approach which seeks to use Russia's possession of nuclear weapons to achieve concrete short-to-medium term political goals.

In contrast, the NSS speaks only in very abstract terms about the need to avoid nuclear blackmail, hedge against long-term international uncertainty, and deter existential threats. There is no mention of how UK nuclear policy could help support NATO solidarity or counter political action by Russia (or any other state threat) in the short term. Nor is there discussion of concepts which could help demonstrate how the government sees the practical utility of nuclear weapons, for example their relevance to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty; the linkage and potential for escalation between conventional, unconventional, cyber and nuclear action; and the question of credibility in an era in which mass civilian casualties are widely considered unacceptable.

While a certain level of secrecy and ambiguity is necessary for deterrence, the lack of discussion of such issues in the NSS does little to support the government's assertion that nuclear weapons are necessary for the UK's defence. This lack of detail might even undercut the credibility of UK nuclear weapons policy by implying that it is not well considered or fully thought-through.

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