The Route to the British Strategic Defence Review

By ANDREW "WIL" WILSON

Royal Air Force (A. Wil Wilson)

Honor guard carrying the Queen's colors

By the end of the 19th century, Great Britain commanded "the largest empire the world had ever seen."[1] Far from being a stepping stone for further greatness, victory in 1815 marked the culmination of Britain's power, and its position—particularly in terms of industrial preeminence relative to the other great powers of the day—started to decline. The Great War and World War II stretched Britain's economic base further, and by 1945, the United Kingdom (UK) could no longer "claim to be a superpower, but [was] a middle-ranking European power."[2]

There are two main schools of thought on the development of British defence policy since 1945. The first (orthodox) view "attributes the reduction in the size of Britain's defence establishment since 1945 to entirely financial and economic pressures" based on an "ideology of decline."[3] The second (alternative) view argues that "Britain's reduction in status from a great power to a regional power . . . was the result of new international circumstances."[4] While the alternative view seems to ignore the fact that one of the new international circumstances was the decline of the UK's political and economic power base, the "story of post-war British global policy as an inevitable process of recognising reduced material power"[5] also fails

to capture the full facts. Both arguments are as correct as they are simplistic.

Britain, "like France, was left with some pretensions to a global role"[6]—along with the pretense that there was, however, a very real legacy of global interest that strengthened in the contemporary, globalized world. Britain was a member of the United Nations Security Council's Permanent 5 and a nuclear power. Moreover, the British economy was "founded on international trade," and it depended "on foreign countries for supplies of raw materials, above all oil."[7]

At the same time that Britain was adjusting its defence (and foreign) policy to its reduced material power base, the security environment was also changing. The ending of the Cold War created the idea that there was no longer a defining issue in foreign policy and that, while "the last two hundred years, the dominant force in international affairs has been the nation state . . . over the next twenty years, the risks to international stability seem as likely to come from other factors."[8] With no threat of a direct attack on Britain, it became "commonplace in the 1990s to talk of security

rather than defence,"[9] as softer issues replaced the hard threat of annihilation or assimilation by the Soviets. Stability based on fear had been replaced by "stability based on the active management of . . . risks."[10]

The Route to the Strategic Defence Review

Since 1945, the United Kingdom has conducted numerous defence reviews and realignments, which have followed a pattern of crisis and review, with changes interpreted as either financially, situationally, or personality driven. Regardless of the review or the government of the day, trends and similarities can be observed in the policy choices and changes, namely a "positive and engaged role in global affairs [and] Britain's preparedness . . . to intervene militarily as part of international coalitions."[11] The maintenance of a nuclear capability is also enduring.

The Three Pillars policy (1948) and the Three Phases (1950)—which operationalized the former—sought realignment against the Soviet threat following World War II. The Three Pillars focused on maritime and air assets and on nuclear deterrence but was

Squadron Leader Andrew "Wil" Wilson is Commanding Officer of the Operational Training, Advisory, and Standardisation Cell in the Royal Air Force (RAF) Force Protection Centre at RAF Honington, Suffolk, United Kingdom. The views expressed in this article are his own and do not necessarily reflect the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence policy.

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Troops form a perimeter as Chinook helicopter lands

flawed as neither the air assets nor nuclear capabilities that it relied upon were in place. Thus, the Three Phases sought to use European-based U.S. military power to first deter and then, if deterrence failed, hold the Soviets (while conventional reinforcements arrived from America), and finally strike Soviet forces with nuclear and strategic air capabilities while maneuvering conventional land forces to close with the enemy.

The Defence Policy and Global Strategy Papers (1952) cemented UK reliance on nuclear forces by focusing on an initial defence of "unparalleled intensity," concentrated both defensively, to deter or in response to an attack, and offensively, in a followup operation to return to the status quo. In the face of ongoing food rationing in the United Kingdom, this military-led review saw an increase in defence spending that, by 1956, when Britain's request for much-needed International Monetary Fund loans to fund the Suez crisis was thwarted by U.S. intervention, was a huge drain on the country. The Sandys Review (1957) noted, "Over the last 5 years, defence has on average absorbed 10 percent of Britain's gdp [gross domestic product]. Some 7% of the working population are either in the Services or supporting them."[12]

The costs of military manpower and equipment to the supported society, both financially and in terms of the reduced capacity to contribute to other areas of the economy, had been a balancing act since the industrialization of war in the Napoleonic era; Britain in the 1950s and 1960s was no different. Much in the same way that, in contemporary Russia, nuclear forces had been used to plug conventional capability gaps caused by financial decline, the Sandys Review cut conventional forces and focused on nuclear capabilities. This review also saw direction and responsibility shift from the military to the ministry.

The Healy Review (1967) saw the next significant events in Britain's defence policy. Forces were "seriously overstretched and . . . dangerously under-equipped [and there had been] no real attempt to match political commitments to military resources [or the] economic circumstances of the nation."[13] The concept of flexibility—an enduring theme often regarded as a euphemism for cuts—appeared at this time: the government needed to "strike a balance between . . . defence requirements and the degree of flexibility it can afford as an insurance against the inherent fallibility of judgement."[14] With European Economic Community membership on the table, reducing the burden of a large standing army in Germany, which would have undermined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) flexible response doctrine, was unacceptable. An "accelerated withdrawal" from tasks east of Suez, where Britain's influence was declining anyway, was the only real option.

The withdrawal from out-of-area roles and the greater reliance on NATO continued through détente. The Nott Review (1981)—in reality a realignment in the face of "severe economic downturn and the introduction of crash planning to control public spending"[15] rather than a review—saw the government under pressure to reestablish the right balance "'between inevitable resource constraints and . . . necessary defence requirements.' In other words, the Government's commitments to spend money on defence have outstripped the availability of funds."[16] As in 1950, the plan was to hold the United Kingdom until reinforced by the United States; the fact that this policy mirrors the contemporary defence policy of the fledgling Baltic states exposes the extent to which the UK had been in financial crisis.

The pattern of crisis (military, political, or economic) followed by review continued at the end of the Cold War with Options for Change (1990–1991) and then the Defence Costs Study–Front Line First (1994). Neither was a formal review, but each sought financial realignment from the peace dividend expected with the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Britain sought to "devise a structure for [its] regular forces appropriate to the new security situation and meeting [its]

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essential peacetime operational needs" in order to "bring savings and a reduction in [defence's] share of [gross domestic product]."[17]

Unlike previous reviews, which had been conducted with financial considerations at the fore, the government was keen to stress that Options for Change was a response to the evolving security environment that would serendipitously create savings.[18] This was a subtle shift in emphasis but a noteworthy one nonetheless, as it marked a desire, if not a trend, for providing defence on what was required first and what could be afforded second. Indeed, it heralded a paradigm shift—or, arguably, a return to pre-Napoleonic defence spending trends—from threat-based to capability-based assumptions.[19] Options for Change failed to deliver the expected peace dividend, and with the economy still in the doldrums, further cuts were required. Capability-based planning and the widespread cuts of the previous reviews did not allow the military's teeth to be cut, so the tail became the target. Defence planning was in a state of flux, a common problem when a finite threat is replaced by less tangible risks. The privatization and civilianization of support functions in an attempt to make every pound contribute to fighting capability impacted heavily on the British military's ability to operate out of area just as this role was about to return to saliency.

Sentinel Airborne Stand Off Radar aircraft landing at Waddington

Fuchs wheeled armored personnel carrier on patrol in Iraq

Artist rendering of Type 45 destroyer HMS *Daring*

Issues for British Defence

Defence issues were the dominant theme during the Cold War, rather than the security issues that arose in the post–Cold War environment. While defence is limited to military matters, security is political, social, economic, and environmental. Accordingly—and despite by 2003 there being no major conventional military threats to the United Kingdom or NATO—the scope of threats to the safety of UK citizens and British interests apparently broadened after 1990. The focus shifted from "the well being of the state" to "ensuring a peaceful society for all its members."[20] This is an interesting paradox in that, while the threat of annihilation or assimilation by the Soviets had disappeared, the resulting shift from preserving life and sovereignty to developing quality of life and lifestyles seemed to generate more, and apparently greater, threats.

The "traditional juggling act between Britain's various interests—imperial versus continental, strategic versus financial," which ran throughout the days of Empire—"continued in the same old fashion,"[21] as did the juxtaposition of decline and internationalism, global and regional highlighted above. In the 19th century, "nothing frightened . . . British imperialists more than . . . relative economic decline, simply because of its impact upon British power."[22] Contemporary concerns focused on protecting an economy based on international trade and the import of natural resources. This created a "much broader approach to security . . . radically different to traditional attitudes in which international security is seen primarily in terms of state centred defence postures."[23] How radically different this was is debatable; the Empire had, after all, been a fundamentally economic venture that in turn created an untouchable power base.

A paradigm shift was developing. The armed forces had been the traditional guarantors of peace throughout the evolution of pre-industrial and industrial warfare, but now warfare was entering a fourth generation, and some argued that the military might not be the organization best placed to deal with it. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and removal of a direct conventional strategic threat to the United Kingdom, it has been argued that the primary justification for maintaining the British armed forces no longer exists. Moreover, using the military for the broader security issues that the UK must now mitigate "will be not only inadequate, but probably counter-productive."[24] Fourth-generation threats had traditionally been intrastate and considered criminal acts, but the expansion of international terrorism altered this concept. There is a failure here, though, to recognise that issues such as counterterrorism and counternarcotics—which had been in the realm of civilian authorities with military powers providing only assistance—were now beyond those agencies. Others argue that the Strategic Defence Review (SDR), while taking the nation beyond previous threat-based reviews, does not go far enough in creating a joined-up (that is, intra-governmental) approach to security.

Both arguments fail to appreciate that SDR is about *defence*. Wider security issues, including the causes of instability, are addressed *elsewhere* in government (for example, the Department for International Development and the former Prime Minister's Commission on Africa). Such a merger of portfolios is

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beginning to be implemented in government and tactically, as the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan show, but defence is the foundation upon which security issues are both facilitated and addressed. In the contemporary world, there is a blurring of defence and security, as defence issues for states such as Britain diminish, and at times defence policy "is scarcely distinguishable from security policy."[25] This does not mean, however, that they are the same things. SDR does acknowledge the need for nonmilitary tools and states that "deterrent extends well beyond the military dimension to a response co-ordinated across Government."[26] What else it says about Britain's defence needs will be considered now.

SDR and Beyond

In 1982, 1987, and 1992, the Conservatives had used defence in general and nuclear policy in particular to undermine Labour's electoral credibility, but by 1997, defence was not a key election issue. Indeed, during the 1997 election, Labour turned its former weakness into a strength. The end of the Cold War meant Labour was no longer hamstrung by in-party tensions regarding the nuclear issue, and while it "remains a sensitive issue, particularly to the left of the party,"[27] the nuclear issue was not an important focus of the election, within or without the Labour party; poor morale in the military and lack of strategic focus caused by Options for Change and Defence Costs Study were.

In its 1997 manifesto, Labour promised a "strategic defence and security review to reassess [Britain's] essential security interests and defence needs" that would be "foreign policy led, first assessing [Britain's] likely overseas commitments and interests and then establishing how [British] forces should be deployed to meet them."[28] Like all good politicians, Labour was true to its word once elected, and the foreign policy–led SDR—an "open and consultative" process involving military, government officials, and experts from academia—was an early initiative. "SDR was repeatedly and deliberately described . . . as a policy review, not a budgetary or organisational review," and Labour was critical of the previous government's "treasury driven" realignments and the structures these had left.[29] That did not, however, lead to a radical departure from enduring policy preferences seen in the earlier reviews, such as alliance with NATO and the United States, an international role in defence of national interest, and the retention of nuclear capability. Moreover, the fundamental reshaping of forces that SDR promised did not occur; how forces could be deployed to meet challenges was the focus, rather than reshaping those forces to meet the challenges. The review was also not exempt from budgetary realities, and its publication was delayed when the Treasury questioned the costs.

The foreign policy baseline established for SDR was very conservative, and there was no blank sheet of paper to fill. Radical options such as abandoning alliances, merging or abandoning the three services, or replacing internationalism with isolationism did not seem to have been even considered. SDR built on the internationalist agenda of Tony Blair's government. It also sought to provide the stability that the defence community had been lacking since the end of the Cold War, when defence policy under the Conservatives had been "characterised more by rolling review rather than by stable planning."[30] Perhaps a completely radical approach was not what had been required.

Capability-based planning continued, with an aspiration to provide flexible, agile forces, efficient in the delivery of military power to affect situations. There was an emphasis on joint operations, with a number of joint organizations established in SDR.

The mission of "Defence Diplomacy" was introduced—although previous shows of force, combined exercises, overseas visits by ships, and Britain's involvement in NATO Partnership for Peace initiatives imply this new mission had been extant.

In sum, while not as radical, far reaching, or independent of budgetary constraints as it was billed, SDR *did* consolidate the capability-based planning that had become necessary in the face of an amorphous threat and gave those developing and executing it a degree of stability.

On September 11, 2001, this amorphous threat solidified. In 2002, the government responded with a New Chapter for SDR intended to "re-examine the UK's defence posture in response to the challenges of asymmetric warfare and international terrorism."[31] Despite the manifestation of a tangible threat, albeit executed by ephemeral and transient

Author with Sierra Leone police team

actors, there was not a return to the threat-based planning that had prevailed during the Cold War. The New Chapter sought to "understand better what [British] Armed Forces can achieve in countering threats abroad, and what sort of operations they might be engaged in."[32] In an environment where "we often do not even know who the enemy is, much less where,"[33] the requirement for flexible forces was again articulated as the answer. This time, however, flexibility appeared to be less a euphemism for cuts and more a sensible response to an indistinct threat.

It could be argued that while the world's interest in Britain had declined, Britain's interest in the world had increased. If Britain were to continue to protect its international interests, the alliances that it had established would have to endure. The Labour government planned to place Britain at the "centre of international decision-making instead of at its margins"[34] and saw "the security and stability of Europe and the maintenance of the transatlantic relationship [as] fundamental to [Britain's] security

and defence policy."[35] Of key importance was the transatlantic relationship.

Modern Forces, Modern World?

The United Kingdom has displayed enduring defence policy preferences and, despite being billed as a radical, far-reaching review, SDR and its descendants have not diverted far from these preferences: alliance, internationalism, and maintaining a nuclear capability. The security environment has changed, but these preferences continue.

In 2003, the UK Ministry of Defence's Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre (JDCC) argued that the "greatest risk to UK security would derive from the strategic environment changing faster than the UK could acquire and/or apply resources to meet that threat."[36] The SDR and its New Chapter both predate this declaration and sought to provide for the nation's

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defence needs out to 2015 based on the flexibility to respond to emerging and new threats. What does the JDCC assessment say about how the SDR had achieved its aim? Indeed, as SDR did not fundamentally diverge from enduring UK policy preferences, what were the prospects for the United Kingdom in dealing with new challenges as and where they arise?

Alliance. The United Kingdom has aligned itself predominantly with the United States both bilaterally and through NATO. Indeed, during the Cold War, and specifically at the time of the Three Pillars review, the transatlantic alliance was critical in ensuring the UK's defence. Now the United Kingdom is faced with fourth-generation threats where nonmilitary tools are as important in countering the threat as military capability; the hard approach to security adopted by America may not be appropriate, and the softer European way of containment and negotiation may not be enough. But Britain is well placed to fulfil its often-touted role as a transatlantic bridge. Labour had been elected on a pro–European Union manifesto and was able to embrace and steer European Security and Defence Policy, mitigating its potential opposition to the enduring UK preference for a special relationship with the United States and U.S./European relations vis-à-vis NATO. By retaining the ability to operate alongside the United States and also to provide operational leadership and frame-

work nation status to European operations, the United Kingdom can have disproportionate influence over the shape and outcome of intervention operations. In doing so, it can place its national interests abroad to the fore when the international community addresses problems.

That said, the 2003 Iraq war "demonstrated that the UK had no [or more accurately, limited] influence over the ultimate decision to go to war nor the shaping and execution of the campaign."[37] Britain may seek a role as Europe's "alpha male," but in the transatlantic alliance, it is a firmly junior partner. The paradox is that the UK role as a leader in European defence is facilitated by its hanging on to the operational and technological coattails of the United States.

Internationalism. SDR assumed that in the post–Cold War world, Britain "must be prepared to go to the crisis, rather than have the crisis come to us."[38] There is, however, a fundamental question to be asked regarding the interventionist approach to defence: does military intervention overseas really "contribute to the defence of the UK [and] have the interventions of recent years—in Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Iraq, and so forth—made Britain more secure?"[39]

Britain's economy and its interests are international and were forged at the time of empire. The colonial states were colonized principally because of their resources, which remain important today. Hence, Britain has an economic interest in ensuring stability throughout its former colonies, be they African or in the Middle East. But Britain was not alone as a colonist, nor is it, along with

M1344 minigun mounted in Chinook helicopter can fire up to 4,000 rounds per minute

Interior of Panther armored command vehicle

the United States, isolated in its reliance on the global market. The other great European powers are reliant on imports and markets in former colonial regions, but none seem as willing as the United Kingdom to intervene there to stabilize economies and communities. Intervention by Britain has been necessary, but it has created threats as well as mitigated and managed them. Indeed, not only has Britain become a target—from both transnational and organic terrorism—following its interventions alongside America, but it has also taken on greater burdens relative to the other European nations, which benefit from stable markets while avoiding associated security and financial burdens. This is especially clear in the case of Iraq.

Nuclear Capability. Britain's nuclear capability puts it in an exclusive international club—one, as can be seen in the ongoing situations in North Korea and Iran, in which membership is vigorously restricted. During the Cold War, nuclear weapons provided a real operational and strategic capability, the use of which was well within the realm of reality. In the contemporary, securitized world, the use of nuclear weapons seems more remote. Indeed, the case for British nuclear deterrent looked flimsier after 9/11 as the utility of nuclear weapons (both as weapons systems and as political tools) diminished. Nuclear weapons are seen as the ultimate insurance that would make aggressors think twice and as key to the UK's global status. But al Qaeda was not deterred from attacking the United States, nor was the Taliban deterred from supporting it. Moreover, neither Britain, France, Russia, nor the United States has been able to coerce India, Pakistan, Iran, or North Korea to give up their nuclear programs.

SDR did not remove "Labour's bogeyman" for both pragmatic and political reasons. The money for Trident had already been allocated, and the costs of removing it early would have been at least as high as retaining it; and in terms of global status, "there was no chance that . . . Mr. Blair or any successor would take Britain out of the nuclear business."[40] The decision on Trident's replacement is due during this parliament, but the government currently seems reluctant to reawaken this ghost.

Balancing Defence

The view that Britain's security choices have been steered solely by its decline is incorrect, but that is not to say that decline had no influence. SDR was billed as a fundamental rethink, but it stuck firmly to these policy preferences (of alliance, internationalism, and maintaining a nuclear capability) and in many ways was disingenuous in its claims; it was critical of previous reviews, which it considered solely financially driven, while at the same time was itself curtailed by budgetary considerations. It claimed that British involvement in operations overseas was as a Kantian "force for good" but did not advertise as loudly the positive Hobbesian impact on British interests that such operations would yield. Moreover, military operations conducted for good are operations of choice rather than necessity and, therefore, at odds with Just War theory. SDR also promised a fundamentally foreign policy–led review, but the structure of the military and the tasks it has to perform differ little from before and the foreign policy baseline used was very conservative.

That said, UK defence—the actual focus of SDR—is secure and "as an island nation in the north west Atlantic, the UK is one of the safest places on earth from external threats" to its sovereignty.[41] Moreover, both SDR and its descendants acknowledge that in the contemporary era, the UK's armed forces must form part of a joined-up approach if Britain is to maintain and enhance its physical, political, and economic security. As defence and security have become more closely identified with each other, however, it is important to remember that they are not the same. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London: Fontana, 1998), 290.

[2] Stuart Croft et al., *Britain and Defence 1945–2000* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2001), 29.

[3] Michael Dockrill, *British Defence Since 1945* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 125.

[4] Ibid., 127.

[5] Croft et al., 29.

[6] Paul Rogers, "Reviewing Britain's Security," *International Affairs* 73, no. 4 (1997).

[7] United Kingdom Ministry of Defence (UKMOD), *The Strategic Defence Review* (July 1998), chapter 2, paragraph 19, available at <www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/65F3D7AC-4340-4119-93A2-20825848E50E/0/sdr1998_complete.pdf>.

[8] Ibid., chapter 2, paragraph 29.

[9] Croft et al., 5

[10] UKMOD, *Strategic Defence Review*, chapter 1, paragraph 10.

[11] Robert Dover, "The Prime Minister and the Core Executive: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Reading of UK Defence Policy Formulation 1997–2000," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 7 (2005).

[12] Quoted in Croft et al., 13.

[13] Ibid., 17–18.

[14] House of Commons, Select Committee on Defence, *Defence—Eighth Report*, "Historical Context" (London: Defence Committee Publications, September 3, 1998), available at <www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmdfence/138/13804.htm>.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Croft et al., 20–22.

[19] Threat-based assumptions look at what one needs to counter. Capability-based assumptions look at what is available and how best to use it to counter threats. Capability-based planning is most common when the threat is amorphous and/or funding is limited.

[20] Rogers.

[21] Kennedy, 299.

[22] Ibid., 294.

[23] Rogers.

[24] Ibid.

[25] William Hopkinson, "The Making of British Defence Policy," *Royal United Services Institute Journal* 145, no. 5 (October 2000).

[26] UKMOD, *Strategic Defence Review*.

[27] Ibid. See also current discussion on the replacement of the UK strategic nuclear deterrent.

[28] See "Labour Manifesto 1997," available at <www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1997/1997-labour-manifesto.shtml>.

[29] Colin Mciness, "Labour's Strategic Defence Review," *International Affairs* 74, no. 4 (1998).

[30] Ibid.

[31] UKMOD, *Defence White Paper* 04/71 (London: UKMOD, September 17, 2004).

[32] UKMOD, *The Strategic Defence Review: A New Chapter* (London: UKMOD, July 2002), section 2, paragraph 2, available at <ww.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/79542E9C-1104-4AFA-9A4D-8520F35C5C93/0/sdr_a_new_chapter_cm5566_vol1.pdf>.

[33] Michael Walker, "Transforming UK Armed Forces," *Royal United Services Institute Journal* 150, no. 1 (February 2005).

[34] "Labour Manifesto 1997."

[35] UKMOD, *Delivering Security in a Changing World* (London: UKMOD, 2003), paragraph 2.1.

[36] Christopher Bellemy, quoted in Defence UKMOD, *Defence White Paper* 04/71.

[37] Ibid.

[38] UKMOD, *Strategic Defence Review*.

[39] Paul Robinson, "Why Britain Needs a New Defence Policy," *Royal United Services Institute Journal* 150, no. 4 (August 2005).

[40] "A Ticking Bomb," *The Economist*, March 18, 2006.

[41] Michael Codner, "UK Defence—Ten Questions for the General Election," *Royal United Services Institute Journal* 150, no. 2 (April 2005).