

Research Briefing

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A guide to British defence reviews

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Summary

The UK Government has conducted at least one review of its defence policy in every decade since the Second World War.

Recent iterations have broadened beyond purely defence considerations and now reflect the government's assessment of national security, outline the core values of its foreign policy, and set out an overarching strategy to guide international and domestic policy.

In 2021 the government published the [Integrated Review of security, defence, development, and foreign policy](#). The unforeseen pace of geopolitical change, however, necessitated a [refresh of that strategy in 2023](#).

Following the general election on 4 July 2024, the new Labour government [announced a new strategic defence review](#) on 16 July. The government said the review will “consider the threats Britain faces, the capabilities needed to meet them, the state of UK armed forces and the resources available.” The review will be led by Lord Robertson, a former Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary General, and will report in the first half of 2025.

This paper is a guide to the main recommendations for the armed forces of the defence reviews that have taken place since 1945.¹

What is a defence review?

A defence review enables a government to present a forward-looking assessment of Britain's strategic interests and requisite military requirements. It examines the defence and security landscape, identifies current and emerging threats and then decides how best to organise and equip the Armed Forces.

Recent iterations have broadened beyond purely defence considerations. The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) was published alongside a National Security Strategy (NSS). By 2015 they were interwoven in one document. In 2021 the government published what it called an Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy.

¹ This paper focuses solely on reviews that involved the fundamental restructuring of the armed forces or a shift in strategic thinking by the government. Statements of Defence Estimates have not been included as these were largely statements of policy and an evaluation of the activities of the armed forces over the year. Statements of Defence Estimates were halted in the 1990s.

Challenges for defence reviews

There are restrictions. Any new government inherits the defence policy, force numbers and force capabilities of its predecessor. Procurement of major pieces of equipment take years, sometimes decades, to come into service, meaning governments can be financially tied to expensive programmes not of their own making.

An oft-heard comment when discussing defence reviews is whether they are Treasury- or strategy-led. That is, are they directed or influenced by the financial realities of the day or are they the outcome of a deeply thought out strategic assessment. The Sandys, Healey and Mason reviews of the 1950s-1970s were all arguably motivated as much by budgetary considerations as foreign policy ones.

Another perennial issue is affordability: where there is a mismatch between funding and the plans. Ben Wallace, then Defence Secretary, made this point when discussing past reviews in early 2020: “no SDSR that I can remember, going back to the early ’90s, has been properly funded to back up the ambitions.”² The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy said: “the 2015 plan for the future of defence was never affordable.”³

Reviews can be quickly undone by subsequent events. The 1981 Nott Review’s recommendations to significantly reduce the Royal Navy fleet were largely reversed after the Falklands War. The 9/11 attacks prompted the Labour Government to add a new chapter to its 1998 Strategic Defence Review to reflect the shift towards counter-terrorism. The 2021 Integrated Review was refreshed two years later to reflect the impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Evolution of British defence reviews: 1945 to present day

The first major, wholesale strategic defence review post World War Two is widely considered to be the Sandys Review in 1957. There has been at least one defence review in every decade since then at irregular intervals.

² [HC Deb 3 February 2020 c11](#)

³ [“Revisiting the UK’s national security strategy: The National Security Capability Review and the Modernising Defence Programme”](#), Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 15 July 2019, HC 2072, 2017-19, p7

In the interim periods the general approach of successive governments had been to present a more or less annual statement on defence policy to Parliament, either in addition to or combined with, the annual defence estimates. Re-instated in 1946 that report was initially referred to as the Statement on Defence, and subsequently became known as the Statement on the Defence Estimates (SDE) in the mid-1960s. The reports were wide ranging and set out both an extensive overview of defence policy and the activities of the Armed Forces within that given year; and the requisite plans for provision of manpower, equipment and budgets. As such, many analysts have referred to them as defence white papers. The last SDE was published in 1996 in the last year of the then Conservative Government. Under the subsequent Labour Government a Defence White Paper,⁴ akin to the SDE, was published the first year after the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, but that practice was discontinued shortly after.

Expansion beyond purely defence issues

In 2010, when the Coalition Government was formed, one of its first actions was to announce a Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). Where previous reviews focused solely on defence and the Armed Forces, the SDSR incorporated linked areas of policy including counter-terrorism; international aid and diplomacy; border and cyber security; and homeland defence.

The SDSR also prompted a programme of institutional reform. Given the new approach to national security, and in order to bring all the different strands of work together in a coherent, co-ordinated and effective manner, both the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the SDSR acknowledged the need for strong leadership and guidance at the centre of Government.

The Government established a National Security Council with responsibility for overall decision-making and to oversee the implementation of the NSS and the SDSR. Subsequent governments have continued to draw more of Whitehall into the review process.

The 2010 Government also committed to holding an SDSR every five years, arguing “one clear lesson since the last Strategic Defence Review in 1998 is the need more frequently to reassess capabilities against a changing strategic environment.”⁵

The new Conservative Government duly held a fresh NSS/SDSR in 2015.

The early election in 2017, combined with concerns about the changing security environment, prompted calls for a fresh SDSR. Instead, the Government opted for a National Security Capabilities Review and a Modernising Defence Programme.

⁴ The Defence White Paper 1999, Cm 4446, December 1999

⁵ [Securing Britain in an age of Austerity: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), Cm 7948, 19 October 2010

In December 2019 the Johnson Government announced plans to conduct an Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy (IR21). This was subsequently published in March 2021 accompanied by a separate command paper focusing on defence's contribution to the Integrated Review.

2023 review

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Government committed to refreshing the Integrated Review. This was published in March 2023 (IR23), followed by a refreshed defence command paper in July 2023.

The IR23 affirmed many of the trends shaping the international environment identified in IR21: shifts in the distribution of global power; inter-state 'systemic' competition over the nature of the international order; rapid technological change; and worsening transnational challenges.

However, the government said the "transition into a multipolar, fragmented and contested world has happened more quickly and definitively than anticipated".

The then Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, said the refresh was "[overdue but welcome](#)", noting "this is a challenging moment for our security and that of our allies and for our place in the world." However, he also said the refresh "[does not answer growing questions concerning capability gaps that weaken our national defence and undermine the UK's NATO contribution](#)".

A new review

The Labour party [election manifesto 2024](#) committed to undertaking a strategic defence review within the party's first year in office.

Following the general election on 4 July, the new Labour government [announced a new strategic defence review](#) on 16 July. The terms of reference [said the review](#) will consider all aspects of defence but will not consider other areas of national security. The review will be externally led and is expected to report to the Prime Minister and Defence Secretary in the first half of 2025.

Naming defence reviews

The Sandys, Healey, Mason and Nott Reviews are named after the then Minister of Defence/Secretary of State for Defence: Duncan Sandys, Dennis Healey, Roy Mason and John Nott.

The 2010 and 2015 reviews used the terms SDSR (Strategic Defence and Security Review). The 2021 review became the Integrated Review of security,

defence, development and foreign policy and the 2023 iteration known as the Integrated Review Refresh.

The Labour government is [using the term](#) 'strategic defence review' to describe its proposed review.

Reforming the Ministry of Defence

It is also worth noting that since 1946 successive governments have published the outcome of five independent reviews into the central organisation for defence.

Outside any wholesale review of defence policy and the structure of the Armed Forces, those reports focused solely on recommendations for change to the organisational structure and management of defence.

The first of those reviews was in 1946 and was intended to encompass the lessons learnt during the Second World War (Cm 6923). The second was in 1958 following the Sandys Review (Cm 476); the third was in 1963 and one of its main recommendations was the establishment of a unified Ministry of Defence which would absorb the individual Service Ministries (Cm 2097); while the fourth review was in 1984 (Cm 9315).

The most recent was the Levene Review of 2011 in which Lord Levene examined the structure and management of the Ministry of Defence.

1

Post-World War Two

Immediately after the Second World War, it was acknowledged that a period of reflection was required before any decisions on the eventual structure and size of the Armed Forces should be made. A period of assessment was considered necessary while the fallout of the war was still being felt and great uncertainty in the international order remained. It was also regarded as essential that time be given for the full implications of the advances in science and technology that had been made during the war, including the deployment of the atomic bomb, to be incorporated into strategic thinking.

The first vestiges of a post-World War Two defence policy emerged in 1948 with the 'Three Pillars Strategy'. This policy was based on the premise that the security of the British Commonwealth depended upon three pillars: defence of the UK, maintaining vital sea communications and securing the Middle East as a defensive and striking base against the Soviet Union. That policy was followed in 1950 and 1952 with the Defence Policy and Global Strategy Papers which were internal reviews led by the Service Chiefs. The first paper was agreed just prior to the outbreak of the Korean War and emphasised the deterrent value of US atomic supremacy over the Soviet Union and the necessary build-up of NATO forces to a level capable of overcoming a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, including a formal commitment to the defence of Germany.

In response to the outbreak of the Korean War the UK accelerated its rearmament programme and defence spending was planned to rise rapidly from 1951, to approximately 10% of GNP. As Andrew Dorman noted in the book *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, "the paper presented a logical implementation of the Three Pillars Strategy using the American nuclear capability to offset British deficiencies in this area".⁶ While supporting the same principles, the second paper in 1952 gave much more emphasis to the concept of 'hot war' as opposed to a 'cold war'; while the balance of conventional forces was shifted towards land and air forces.

⁶ Andrew Dorman, "crises and reviews in British Defence Policy" in Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, Pearson Education, 2001

2

Sandys Review – 1957

Many analysts consider the first major, wholesale strategic defence review conducted after the Second World War to be the Sandys review in 1957 as it represented the first proper forward looking assessment of Britain's strategic interests and requisite military requirements.

By this time the Cold war had become fully established, communism was on the rise, the UK had joined the NATO alliance and the Armed Forces had been deployed in Korea, Malaya and in Suez, among others.

Defence policy at the time was still predicated on the defence plans which had been established in 1950-52 and was focused heavily on the rearmament programme that had been largely conceived in response to the Korean War.

However, following the end of the war in 1953 it was recognised that the plans for a short intensive rearmament programme no longer met the UK's strategic requirements and that the associated military expenditure was beyond the country's capacity.

On that basis the Sandys review was established. When the review was published in April 1957 it stated at the outset:

The time has now come to revise not merely the size, but the whole character of the defence plan. The Communist threat remains but its nature has changed; and it is now evident that, on both military and economic grounds, it is necessary to make a fresh appreciation of the problem and to adopt a new approach towards it [...]

Britain's influence in the world depends first and foremost on the health of her internal economy and the success of her export trade. Without these, military power cannot in the long run be supported. It is therefore in the true interests of defence that the claims of military expenditure should be considered in conjunction with the need to maintain the country's financial and economic strength.⁷

However, that report also acknowledged the detrimental impact of the significant levels of manpower devoted to the Services (some 7% of the population at the time) on rebuilding the post-war economy, and that advances in military technology, in particular in atomic weaponry and rocket technologies, required a fundamental re-think of military planning.

The aim of the review, therefore, was to establish a defence plan that would enable British forces to perform two main tasks: "to play their part with the

⁷ Defence: Outline of Future Policy, Cm 124, April 1957

forces of Allied countries in deterring and resisting aggression” and “to defend British colonies and protected territories against local attack, and undertake limited operations in overseas emergencies”; while at the same time “making no greater demands that are absolutely necessary upon manpower, money and other national resources”.⁸

Yet some analysts also argued that the Sandys review had been established “to some extent [in] response to the Suez debacle of the previous year which was a diplomatic disaster and had revealed the poor state of readiness of British forces and the obsolescence of much of their equipment”.⁹ Andrew Dorman also noted:

The Suez crisis of 1956 proved to be the next watershed in postwar defence policy [...] The rearmament package announced by Attlee in 1951 had proven to be financially unsustainable and had failed to produce the forces required to deal with the Suez crisis. The Anglo-French response to Nasser’s nationalisation of the Suez Canal took three months to organise, mainly because of a shortage of available forces.¹⁰

The review subsequently placed great emphasis on nuclear deterrence as the mainstay of Britain’s defence policy. It also recommended the abolition of national service, the need for European allies to shoulder more of the conventional burden within NATO, reducing overseas garrisons, a significant reduction in RAF Fighter Command and changing the role of the Navy once again to emphasise a reliance on aircraft carriers as an effective means of bringing power rapidly to bear in peacetime emergencies of limited hostilities.

Any assessment of how well the assumptions made in a defence review stand up to subsequent events is complicated by the inherent uncertainty of the international system, and can only be subjective in its interpretation. There is also the argument that defence planning assumptions will always fall short if a government continues to over-commit itself politically and takes the active decision to operate outside of the assumptions, even for a short period of time.

There were no major crises in the late 1950s, early 1960s which drastically questioned the assumptions in the Sandys review. Indeed the review was arguably more about economic viability and therefore significant cuts in defence capabilities in order to reduce military spending. Yet, as Andrew Dorman concluded:

In the background lay the issue of the cost of defence [...] However, this rethink did not consider abandoning commitments. Despite the experience of

⁸ Defence: Outline of Future Policy, Cm 124, April 1957, para 8-9

⁹ Defence Select Committee, *The Strategic Defence Review*, HC 138-I, Session 1997-1998

¹⁰ Andrew Dorman, “crises and reviews in British Defence Policy” in Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, Pearson Education, 2001

defeat at Suez, the government still wanted to maintain the world role and the review focused on the implementation of existing policy.¹¹

That desire to retain a similar number of commitments on the world stage while at the same time significantly cutting the defence budget, led to allegations of overstretch in the military, an issue that came to be a major motivation for the conduct of the Healey review in the mid-1960s.

¹¹ Andrew Dorman, "crises and reviews in British Defence Policy" in Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, Pearson Education, 2001

3

Healey Reviews – 1965-1968

The incoming Labour Government of 1964 had a different ideological perspective to the preceding Conservative administration, largely favouring a conventional rather than a nuclear emphasis, and subsequently launched a new defence review in 1965. The Statement on the Defence Estimates for that year stated:

The present Government has inherited defence forces which are seriously over-stretched and in some respects dangerously under-equipped [...] There has been no real attempt to match political commitments to military resources, still less to relate the resources made available for defence to the economic circumstances of the nation [...]

The present Government has therefore set in train a series of studies on defence policy; these will cover the effects on force levels and capabilities of a number of different possible courses of action. In the light of these studies it will be possible to review our strategy, taking into account not only the economic position, but also new or reaffirmed political objectives which our strategy must be designed to implement.¹²

The main purposes of the review, therefore, were to bring defence expenditure into balance with the nation's resources, reduce overstretch, and reduce overseas expenditure resulting from the deployment of forces. At the time defence spending was approximately 7% of GNP.

The review initially reported to Parliament in 1966 but was followed up with supplementary policy documents in 1967 and 1968, largely as a result of a financial crisis that had forced the devaluation of Sterling and the requirement on the MOD to find further cost savings.

The main thrust of the overall review was the achievement of substantial savings through the cancellation of major equipment orders, including further aircraft carrier construction and a number of domestic aircraft programmes, and the reorganisation and reduction of the Territorial Army by almost half.

In order to reduce overseas expenditure and overstretch, decisions were also taken to reduce the UK's global footprint and concentrate the deployment of the military more in Europe. That included reductions in British forces deployed in Germany, Cyprus and Malta, withdrawal from Aden, and accelerated withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia and the Persian Gulf ('East of Suez').¹³

¹² Statement on the Defence Estimates 1965, Cm 2592, February 1965

¹³ J Pickering, 'Britain's withdrawal from East of Suez', Palgrave MacMillan 1998, p159

The review also included a commitment to “not undertake major operations of war except in co-operation with allies”.¹⁴

The reduction in forces overseas subsequently led to reductions in manpower requirements. As Dorman noted “this [review] did not seek to change policy per se, but simply look to more efficient means of implementing it in order to provide the requisite savings”.

¹⁴ Statement on the Defence Estimates 1966: Part I The Defence Review, Cm 2901, February 1966

4

Mason Review – 1974-1975

The cuts proposed in the Healey review were only slightly reduced by the Conservative government between 1970 and 1974, although it did undertake to reverse the previous policy on cutting the Territorial Army.

A further change of government in 1974 led to the announcement of yet another defence review on the first day in office of the new Secretary of State for Defence. The review was published as part I to the Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975. That document stated:

In the 1968 Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy the Labour Government made clear its intention that “Britain’s defence forces, apart from those needed to meet certain residual obligations to dependent territories...should...be concentrated in Europe”. This remains the Government’s firm policy. But the Conservative Government’s 1970 supplementary Statement on Defence Policy, while accepting that the North Atlantic Treaty organisation should remain the first priority of defence policy, placed more emphasis on a willingness to counter threats to stability throughout the world. So when the Government came into office in March 1974 it inherited a defence programme of worldwide political and military commitments, and military forces stretched to meet those commitments.¹⁵

Although the government initially declared that it would begin with a reconsideration of the UK’s defence commitments and that no arbitrary financial limit would be set which would have prejudiced the outcome, many analysts considered that the review was pre-empted and therefore shaped by a government decision that defence spending should be reduced from approximately 5% of GDP to around 4.5% over ten years,¹⁶ a commitment founded on the assumption that the UK’s defence budget should move towards the NATO average¹⁷ and precipitated by the economic situation of the UK at the time and a move toward a period of détente in east-west relations.

Like the two previous reviews, the Mason Review arguably therefore became motivated by budgetary considerations as opposed to foreign policy ones. Indeed, the SDE1975 stated that within the agreed reductions in the defence budget “a new balance between commitments and capabilities and between manpower and equipment expenditure will be achieved to meet the Government’s strategic priorities”.¹⁸

¹⁵ Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975, Cm 5976, March 1975

¹⁶ Defence Select Committee, The Strategic Defence Review, HC 138-I, Session 1997-1998

¹⁷ At the time, for example, French defence spending was 3.8% of GDP and the Federal Republic of Germany was 4.1% of GDP.

¹⁸ Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975, Cm 5976, March 1975

Despite the period of detente, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries were identified as the overriding threat to UK national security, and the review subsequently concluded that “NATO should remain the first and overriding charge on the resources available for defence; that our commitments outside the Alliance should be reduced as far as possible to avoid overstressing our forces; and the general purpose forces should be maintained as insurance against the unforeseen.”¹⁹

Four major commitments were subsequently deemed essential: the UK’s contribution to NATO front-line forces in Germany, anti-submarine forces in the eastern Atlantic, home defence and the UK’s nuclear deterrent.

Specialist reinforcement forces were however identified for cuts. The Army’s strategic reserve division was disbanded, the RAF’s transport fleet cut by half and amphibious forces reduced. Airborne capability was also significantly reduced.

The review also committed to withdrawing all British forces in the Mediterranean region, with the exception of Cyprus (although that presence would be reduced), including all maritime forces assigned to NATO in this theatre and from a number of remaining theatres in the far east and West Indies. In total manpower was expected to fall by 11% over the ten year period.

Analysts including Andrew Dorman, noted that the Mason Review was a move towards minimalism, a virtual elimination of Britain’s out-of-area capability, and a realisation that the UK was not and could not afford to be a world military power within the Cold War structure.

However, in its assessment of the review, the Expenditure Committee concluded:

In the public debate on defence, the view is often expressed that the defence budget can be safely cut, with instant savings or other benefits to the economy, and with acceptable consequences for national security. Our examination...has convinced us that this view is largely fallacious...The force reductions resulting from the defence review may over-stretch the Services in the fulfilment of their remaining commitments, and may leave an inadequate margin for dealing with unforeseen tasks.²⁰

Like the Nott Review (see below), the assumptions of the Mason Review were subsequently undermined by the Argentinean invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982. In particular the recommendations of cuts to specialist reinforcement capabilities such as airborne troops, amphibious forces and strategic airlift and a general retrenchment of military forces to focus on Central Europe and the Atlantic were proven to be ill-founded given that the

¹⁹ Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975, Cm 5976, March 1975

²⁰ Second Report from the Expenditure Committee, The Defence Review Proposals, HC 259, Session 1974-75, para 139

Falklands Conflict fell squarely within the ten-year period that this review was supposed to define.

5

Nott Review – 1981

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 coincided with the return to Government of the Conservative party, and consequently resulted in a harder line being adopted with respect to British defence policy and defence spending.

Although defence spending rose significantly in the early years of the Thatcher administration, as Malcolm Chalmers noted “the Conservatives...found difficulties in financing the ambitious programme that they inherited”.²¹

In 1981 the Nott Review was subsequently established in order to realign the UK’s Armed Forces so as to meet the realities of the financial situation. Its intention was not to be a wholesale review of UK defence policy, but a review of the defence programme so that the equipment and procurement programme could be brought into line with available resources.

While confirming the decision to proceed with the replacement of the UK’s nuclear deterrent and rebuild the reserve forces in order to meet the requirement for home defence (both the with the threat of the Soviet Union in mind); the review²² therefore concluded that costs savings could be most easily achieved by making a strategic choice between either the UK’s continental or maritime contribution to NATO.

The latter took the main brunt of the proposed cuts with the Royal Navy earmarked to lose approximately one fifth of its destroyers and frigates, one aircraft carrier and two amphibious ships, thereby further reducing the UK’s expeditionary capability. The naval ice patrol ship, HMS Endurance was also to be withdrawn from the Southern Atlantic. In total the Navy took 57% of the cuts in planned expenditure. As many analysts noted, the cuts to the Navy, while at the same time as committing to the replacement of the nuclear deterrent, emphasised the UK’s reliance on its nuclear capability to counter the Soviet threat and the increasing expectation that the UK would only act as part of the NATO alliance in any other expeditionary operations.²³

Such assumptions were subsequently undermined by the invasion of the Falkland Islands just over six months later. As Lawrence Freedman noted in his book *The Politics of British Defence 1979-1998*:

Defence policy prior to April 1982 can be seen as following NATO orthodoxy by concentrating on land and air forces capable of blocking a conventional

²¹ Malcolm Chalmers, *Paying for defence: Military Spending and British Decline*, Pluto Press, 1985

²² *The United Kingdom Defence Programme: The Way Forward*, Cm 8288, 1981

²³ Defence Select Committee, *The Strategic Defence Review*, HC 138-I, Session 1997-1998

invasion of West Germany, backed up by a nuclear deterrent. Therefore, the most significant feature of the Falklands War was that it was fought well out of the NATO area and with the Royal navy the lead service. It was precisely the war for which Britain was planning least.²⁴

Before the end of 1982 some of the proposed cuts to the Navy had thus been restored, including the retention of a three ship class of aircraft carrier and the retention of a larger fleet of destroyers and frigates that had originally been envisaged. In the government's report into the lessons learned from the Falklands Conflict, it was also announced that the 5th Infantry Brigade was to become an airborne force, including an assault parachute capability which has been withdrawn only a few years earlier under the Mason Review. That paper argued, however, that the conclusions of the Nott review had not been invalidated:

The many useful lessons we have learned from the Falklands Campaign...do not invalidate the policy we have adopted following last year's defence programme review. The Soviet Union – its policies and its military capabilities – continues to pose the main threat to the security of the United Kingdom and our response to this threat must have the first call on our resources. Following the Falklands campaign, we shall now be devoting substantially more resources to defence than had been previously planned. In allocating these, we shall be taking measures which will strengthen our general defence capability by increasing the flexibility, mobility and readiness of all three Services for operations in support of NATO and elsewhere.²⁵

²⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *The Politics of British Defence 1979-1998*, Macmillan Press, 1999, p.83

²⁵ *The Falklands Campaign*, The Lessons, Cm 8758, December 1982, para 313

6 Options for Change – 1990

The framework for the Armed Forces resulting from the Options for Change review was announced in July 1990.

Unlike previous reviews, which had been conducted primarily in response to financial considerations, Options for Change was intended as a response to the changing strategic environment in the post-Cold War era. Nonetheless, the end of the Cold War saw a global opportunity to ‘reap the peace dividend’ and make savings in defence and this was subsequently recognised. In his Statement to the House on 25 July 1990 the then Secretary of State for Defence, Tom King, stated:

In the options for change studies, we have sought to devise a structure for our regular forces appropriate to the new security situation and meeting our essential peacetime operational needs [...]

Our proposals will bring savings and a reduction in the share of GDP taken by defence.²⁶

An analysis by the International Security Information Service suggested that financial and manpower pressures had also made the review unavoidable, regardless of the strategic arguments involved.²⁷ Andrew Dorman also suggested:

The financial pressure upon the defence budget in the late 1980s had been steadily increasing to the extent that a review was already underway. Surprisingly this had been initiated by the Service Chiefs in conjunction with the Chief of the Defence Staff. They felt that the procurement programme had become so far removed from the rest of policy that a review was needed to bring it back into line and force the government to make some politically difficult decisions. As a result of financial pressure ... the Service Chiefs, under the auspices of the CDS, had already agreed to a sweeping across-the-board cut. What was left to consider was how they would manage these changes and the level of cutback required.²⁸

The review implemented a major restructuring of the Armed Forces and was regarded as the beginning of a shift towards a capability-based rather than a threats-based policy in determining future force structure. The aim of the review was to establish “smaller forces, better equipped, properly trained

²⁶ HC Deb 25 July 1990, c470-1

²⁷ “Options for change: the UK defence review, 1990-91”, *International Security Information Service*, No.21, June 1991

²⁸ Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, 2001

and housed as well as motivated. They will need to be flexible and mobile and able to contribute to NATO and, if necessary, elsewhere”.²⁹

The main conclusions of the review therefore outlined a reduction in manpower across all three Services of approximately 18% (56,000) by the mid-1990s.³⁰

The most significant cuts fell on the Army, which was reduced in strength by one third, from 160,000 to 120,000. The largest cuts were in the ground forces based in Germany which were reduced by over half.³¹

Tactical air power based in Germany was significantly reduced with the closure of two out of four RAF bases and the withdrawal of six RAF squadrons.

The review also advocated a reduction in the Royal Navy fleet from 48 destroyers and frigates to 40 (a similar level to that which had originally been proposed by Nott) and a 15% reduction in Nimrod Maritime Patrol Aircraft.

The review reiterated the importance of retaining a strategic nuclear deterrent, although sub-strategic nuclear forces based in Germany were marginally reduced.

What Options for Change achieved was the same basic force composition and balance between the Services as that of the Cold War period, albeit on a smaller scale.

However, the cuts implemented by the Options for Change review were not widely welcomed. Many commentators questioned the rationale of such sweeping cuts before the exact nature of the strategic security environment post Cold-War had been identified and assessed.³²

Following the outbreak of the Gulf War in August 1990 and civil war in the former Yugoslavia in 1992, many analysts also questioned whether the assumptions on which Options for Change was based were credible and whether the reductions envisaged under the review should be re-examined.

In a series of reports on Options for Change, the Defence Select Committee made the following observations:

We have been here before. Ten years ago, as a result primarily of financial pressures, the Government proposed a substantial reduction in the surface fleet and a greater dependence on submarine and air power. This was followed by the hostilities in the Falkland Islands and a reassessment. In July

²⁹ Defence Select Committee, *The Strategic Defence Review*, HC 138-I, Session 1997-1998

³⁰ By the mid-1990s the manpower requirement of the British Army would be reduced from 160,000 to 120,000; the Royal Navy and Royal Marines from 63,000 to around 60,000 and the RAF from 89,000 to around 75,000. HC Deb 25 July 1990, c470-88

³¹ The British Army of the Rhine was cut from three static divisions to two, with one based in the UK in peacetime

³² Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden and General Sir David Ramsbotham, “About face – the British Armed Forces which way to turn?”, *RUSI Journal*, May 2004

1990, in response to a rapidly changing security environment, the Government proposed a reduction in the surface fleet, a significant cut in submarine strength, and maintenance of existing maritime air capability. These proposals have now been followed by hostilities. It is essential that, once again, Ministers review their proposals in the cold light of experience.³³

The additional emergency tour tasks assumed by the infantry since the beginning of 1992, in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, have led to an unacceptable contraction of the emergency tour interval for infantry units with serious consequences for individual service personnel and their families as well as for the Army's capacity to prepare for and carry out its primary wartime roles... these commitments are symptomatic of the pressures which the Army is likely to face on a constant basis in a future characterised by international instability and uncertainty... the mismatch of the Army's resources and commitments looks set to continue.³⁴

Professor Stuart Croft also argued that “commitments have only been trimmed, while resources have been cut; this can only exacerbate the problems that John Nott sought to deal with, and that became evident once again the late 1980s. Radical changes will therefore have to occur at some point”.³⁵

³³ Defence Select Committee, *Options for Change: The Royal Navy*, HC 266, para 40-41

³⁴ Defence Select Committee, *Britain's Army for the 90s*, HC 306, para 56

³⁵ Stuart Croft, *British Security Policy: The Thatcher Years and the End of the Cold War*, Harper Collins, 1991

7

The Defence Costs Study – 1994

In 1994 the then Conservative government undertook a further review of defence spending. The focus this time was on making savings with respect to frontline support functions within the Armed Forces. As Andrew Dorman commented:

The end of the Cold War had heralded considerable talk about a ‘peace dividend’ at a time of economic slump. The MOD therefore found itself the prime target of the Treasury, which sought to reduce government expenditure where it could. The response to this pressure was ‘Front Line First: The Defence Costs Study’ which sought to find the necessary savings without reductions to the front line.³⁶

This premise of maintaining front line operational effectiveness was the key determinant in identifying potential savings.

Three main conclusions came out of the Front Line First review. First that management and command structures across the whole of the MOD should be streamlined, secondly that many defence support functions could be outsourced to the private sector, mainly through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI),³⁷ and thirdly that, as future defence operations were likely to be carried out on a joint Service basis, the rationalisation of command, training and support structures could potentially increase operational effectiveness as well as offering savings. The establishment of a Defence Helicopter Flying School for all three Services by 1997 was one such recommendation. Proposals to rationalise primary and secondary care functions provided by the Defence Medical Services were also outlined, prompting considerable criticism.

Two former military commanders, Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden and General Sir David Ramsbotham commented in an article in May 2004:

As more and more specialist tasks were moved to the civilian sector, so the availability of uniformed, trained specialists fell. For some specialisations this trend could prove to be catastrophic in the long term. For example the review resulted in the ability of the military medical services to support military operational deployments being virtually eliminated.³⁸

³⁶ Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, 2001

³⁷ The Private Finance Initiative was introduced in 1992 as one of a range of policies intended to increase the involvement of the private sector in the provision of public services. More information on PFI is available in Library Research Paper RP03/79 *The Private Finance Initiative*, 21 October 2003

³⁸ Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden and General Sir David Ramsbotham, “About face – the British Armed Forces which way to turn?”, *RUSI Journal*, May 2004

As a result of these recommendations military and civilian personnel within the Armed Forces were to be reduced by 18,700 by the year 2000. The manpower requirement of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines was reduced by 1,900, the Army was cut by 2,200 and the RAF was cut by 7,500. An estimated 7,100 civilian posts were also lost.³⁹

Andrew Dorman argued:

While these cuts did not look as though they would have an effect on the frontline the reality was somewhat different. They raised a number of questions about the ability of Britain's Armed Forces to sustain the number of different types of operations that British forces became involved in. Moreover, the ongoing shift away from a threat-based defence policy [...] toward a capabilities-based policy requiring the dispatch of forces outside the European region required a significant logistical tail, the area most affected by this review.⁴⁰

³⁹ A further breakdown of manpower reductions is available on p.39 of *Front Line First: The Defence Costs Study, 1994*

⁴⁰ Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, 2001

8

Strategic Defence Review and the SDR New Chapter – 1998 and 2002

One of the manifesto commitments of the Labour government when it entered office in 1997 was to conduct a foreign policy-led review to re-assess the UK's national interests and likely overseas commitments in the post-Cold War strategic environment to 2015, and then to establish how the UK's Armed Forces should be structured and deployed in order to meet those interests and commitments.

In an uncertain new security environment characterised by a diversity of multi-centric threats, two main themes emerged from the SDR: the need to move towards more rapidly deployable expeditionary forces capable of addressing any potential threat across the full military spectrum and in any location, and the need to co-ordinate the activities of the three Services more closely by pooling their expertise to achieve maximum operational effectiveness, while at the same time eliminating the duplication of resources.

This tri-service 'Joint' approach was epitomised by the establishment of structures to support one, and if necessary two, Joint Rapid Reaction Forces (JRRFs) formed from across all three Services and due to be operational by 2001; the creation of Joint Force 2000 which combined Harrier aircraft from the RAF and Royal Navy enabling them to operate equally effectively from both land and sea; the establishment of a Joint Helicopter Command bringing all Service battlefield helicopters under a single command; and the amalgamation of the three single-Service logistical organisations with a view to creating a single tri-service logistics organisation in 2001. An improved expeditionary capability was intended to be achieved through the utilisation of the JRRF concept, through a commitment to acquire two new larger aircraft carriers in order to project power more effectively on a global scale, and through the acquisition of new strategic air and sealift capabilities.

The SDR also acknowledged the need to exploit the rapid advances in technology as a means to developing this expeditionary capability, making it the first defence review since the end of the Cold War to seriously consider the impact that technology could have on military strategy, capability and operational effectiveness.

Changes to the composition of the RAF and the Royal Navy were regarded as minimal, with only marginal cuts to both the Royal Navy and RAF fleets.⁴¹

Changes to the structure and composition of the Army were more significant. The restructuring and 're-rolling' of the Army at brigade and regiment level were intended to transform the Service in line with the notion of rapidly deployable and flexible expeditionary forces.⁴²

In addition to the changes in the Regular Army, the Territorial Army also underwent a radical restructuring as a result of the strategic premises of the SDR. Prior to the review the TA had been configured to fight a conventional large-scale war in Europe with units largely allocated as reinforcements to regular UK forces in Germany or in defence of the UK homeland. In order to complement the move in defence strategy toward an expeditionary capability the SDR envisaged a restructuring of the TA that would allow it to integrate more closely with Regular Forces and provide support to the Armed Forces at short notice and across the spectrum of military operations. To support this change, the SDR set out an intention to cut the number of TA volunteers from 56,000 to approximately 40,000, with reductions mainly concentrated in the yeomanry, infantry and supporting combat services.

The conclusions of the SDR were largely welcomed. However, in contrast to the view of the then Secretary of State for Defence, George Robertson, that the SDR was "the most radical restructuring of our Armed Forces for a generation"⁴³ many analysts considered the SDR to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.⁴⁴

The SDR was widely perceived to provide an insurance policy against future uncertainty by advocating a continuation of planning for the full range of defence capabilities, the precise balance of which could be reviewed and readjusted as necessary. The SDR did prompt some criticism, however, with many commentators bemoaning the lack of detail regarding the foreign policy baseline from which the capability decisions outlined in the SDR were taken.

More information on the specific recommendations of the SDR is available in Library briefing [The Strategic Defence Review White Paper](#).

⁴¹ The Royal Navy destroyer/frigate fleet was reduced from 35 to 32 ships and the attack submarine fleet was reduced from 12 to 10. The Mine Counter Measures Vessel fleet was reduced from an original requirement for 25 ships to 22. The net effect of changes was a reduction in the Royal Navy's manpower requirement of 1,400. The RAF's fast jet aircraft were reduced from 177 to 154 and 17 Squadron based in Germany disbanded. The air defence force was cut from 100 to 87 aircraft with 29 Squadron disbanded. The RAF Regiment was also reduced from 14 to 13 squadrons.

⁴² The post-SDR structure of the Army is available online at: http://www.mod.uk/issues/sdr/post_sdr.htm

⁴³ George Robertson writing in The House Magazine, 27 July 1998

⁴⁴ "Robertson's blueprint is more sensible than truly radical", The Times, 8 July 1998 and "The Strategic Defence Review A good job", RUSI Newsbrief, August 1998.

8.1 SDR New Chapter

The New Chapter to the SDR, which was published in July 2002, sought to re-examine the UK's defence posture in response to the challenges of asymmetric warfare and international terrorism, issues highlighted by the events of 11 September 2001. In a statement to the House of Commons on 17 October 2002, the then Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, commented:

Across Government, we have been set new challenges by international terrorism. We have set in train work to re-examine our defence policy and plans in light of the terrorist threat demonstrated by 11 September...As a result, we published a new chapter to the strategic defence review on 18 July. It shows that the strategic defence review's emphasis on expeditionary operations working with allies was right, but demonstrates—crucially—how best to use our forces against a different sort of enemy: one that is determined, well hidden and vastly different from the conventional forces that we might have expected to face in the past.⁴⁵

The New Chapter emphasised three key aims for addressing terrorism and asymmetric warfare more generally: The use of defence diplomacy measures as a means to creating stability; maintaining a wide and flexible range of military and non-military options in order to deter any potential terrorist activity; and the use of military means to rapidly “detect and destroy” any potential terrorist threat.

Identifying the force structure and capabilities required to deliver these desired effects was one of the main themes of the New Chapter. The paper identified two areas where future efforts should be concentrated: developing a Network Enabled Capability to allow for rapid intelligence gathering, decision making and the use of requisite military force within ‘real-time’, and to improve homeland defence, including the creation of 14 Civil Contingency Reaction Forces (CCRFs) from the Reserve Forces to provide assistance at short notice, in response to a request from the emergency services or local authorities.

⁴⁵ HC Deb 17 October 2002, c500

9

Defence White Paper – 2003-2004

While many of the conclusions reached in the SDR and the SDR New Chapter were considered to still be valid, the 2003 White Paper set out proposals for adapting the Armed Forces to meet future security challenges. In doing so it made a number of assumptions with regard to requisite force planning and capabilities:

The Armed Forces face a broader range of tasks across a wider geographical area than originally envisaged under the SDR. In particular, proactive engagement in conflict prevention and short notice peace support and counter-terrorist operations is expected to increase.

The UK will not be able to contribute militarily in every international crisis. Participation will generally be in coalitions with other countries.

The UK's Armed Forces must be more prepared for asymmetric attacks by both state and non-state actors, including the use of WMD through a variety of means.

The Armed Forces must be equipped and configured to fulfil the requirements of homeland defence and countering international terrorism.

Therefore, the Defence Mission and Military Tasks as outlined in the SDR⁴⁶ were streamlined in the White Paper to comprise a single Defence Aim and 18 Military Tasks⁴⁷ against which force structures and capability requirements for the future were to be determined. The number of operations conducted by the UK since the SDR had also been acknowledged as higher than anticipated. Supporting Essay 2 of the White Paper stated:

We have effectively been conducting continual concurrent operations, deploying further afield, to more places, more frequently and with a greater variety of missions than set out in the SDR planning assumptions [...] a major lesson of the last five years is that the Department and the Armed Forces as a whole have to be structured and organised to support a fairly high level of operational activity at all time, not as a regular interruption to preparing for a large scale conflict.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review: Supporting Essays*, July 1998, Essay 6

⁴⁷ Ministry of Defence, *Delivering Security in a Changing World: Supporting Essays*, Cm 6041-II, December 2003, p.4-5

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.7

Multiple, concurrent small to medium-scale operations⁴⁹ that fall mainly within the defined military tasks of peace enforcement and peacekeeping, such as counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation operations and enduring peace support operations, were expected to become the overriding norm. However, the Paper also recognised the need to retain the capability for undertaking large-scale intervention operations, such as Operation *Telic* in Iraq, at longer notice in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Gulf region. Consequently, one of the main themes of the White Paper was the development of planning structures and capabilities designed for flexible expeditionary warfare rather than conventional territorial defence.

Therefore the planning assumptions under the White Paper were revised from those initially set out in the SDR, as follows:

As a norm, and without creating overstretch, the UK should be able to mount:

- An enduring medium-scale peace support operation simultaneously with an enduring small-scale peace support operation and,
- a one-off small-scale intervention operation.

The UK should be able to reconfigure its forces rapidly to carry out:

- an enduring medium-scale peace support operation and,
- a small-scale peace support operation simultaneously with,
- a limited duration medium-scale intervention operation

Given time to prepare, the UK should be capable of undertaking:

- a demanding one-off large-scale operation while still maintaining a commitment to,
- a simple small-scale peace support operation.

In addition, these assumptions take account of the need to meet standing commitments with permanently committed forces, including Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) Aircraft tasked with defending UK airspace.⁵⁰

In line with these planning assumptions the Paper acknowledged that the most demanding expeditionary operations, involving intervention against state adversaries, were unlikely to be conducted without the US, either at the head of a coalition or within NATO.

Therefore, whilst maintaining a broad spectrum of capabilities in order to conduct three concurrent operations (as outlined above) was regarded as

⁴⁹ The UK deployment to Macedonia in 2001 (initially involving approximately 2,000 troops) is described as a small scale operation, while the deployment to Afghanistan in 2001 (involving 4,200 personnel) is described as medium scale.

⁵⁰ Ministry of Defence, *Delivering Security in a Changing World: Supporting Essays*, Cm 6041-II, December 2003, p.7

essential, it was recognised that it would be unnecessary to generate large-scale capabilities across the same spectrum when operating alongside the US or other allies.

Developing interoperability with US command and control structures and delivering capabilities that achieve greatest impact when operating alongside US forces were regarded as priorities.

The implication of these planning assumptions, therefore, was that unilateral action by the UK in the most demanding expeditionary operations was unlikely.

However, the Paper did not make the presumption that the US would always be engaged. It reiterated the need for the Armed Forces to maintain the capability to lead and act as the framework nation for a European or similar *ad hoc* coalition operation of medium-scale, where the US was not involved.

Further information is available in Library briefing [Defence White Paper](#).

In July 2004 a further paper entitled Future Capabilities was published which outlined the specific changes and cuts that would be made to the structure and capabilities of the Armed Forces in order to meet the revised defence planning assumptions. Those restructuring proposals are outlined in detail in Library Research Paper RP04/72, [The Defence White Paper: Future Capabilities](#), September 2004.

The conclusions reached in the White Paper were largely welcomed by most commentators, despite what many regarded as a lack of detail. However, concerns were raised over the potential cost of putting the Armed Forces on a more 'high tech' footing and the indication of cuts in manpower at a time when the Armed Forces were committed in a number of theatres of operation. Bronwen Maddox, then Foreign Editor at The Times commented:

The biggest gamble taken in the White Paper is that this view of future wars is correct. On this view, the wars that will demand British engagement in the next couple of decades are likely to resemble those of the 1990s – Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Kosovo. Or they will resemble those of this century – Afghanistan and Iraq – and will be fought alongside the US. But they will not be like the Falklands, the Cold War or the Second World War.

This view is certainly plausible given the instability of the Middle East and Central Asia. But the question is whether such wars would really be as small as this document appears to imply [...] Even if the White Paper is right in its vision of the wars of the future, it may well have underestimated the need for peacekeeping troops.⁵¹

The White Paper is fuzzy too, in its claims about the white heat of technology [...] there is a tendency, as in every White Paper, to imply that newer

⁵¹ "Britain's future wars may be small but they will certainly not be cheap", The Times, 12 December 2003

technology will be cheaper. The most obvious weakness of the White Paper is that the bill has not yet come in – and it is likely to be high.⁵²

Michael Codner argued:

There was little in the 2003 White Paper that was new. It was, rather, a summary of progress in a number of initiatives and, for want of a better word, new conceptualisations such as Effects Based Operations (EBO) and Network Enabled Capability (NEC). It was published at a time when there was widespread awareness that there was not enough money in the Defence Budget to fund defence activities and the equipment plan and that the imbalance was too large to be redressed by modest increases in defence spending and greater efficiencies.

Affordability of NEC is another issue. It is not that the communications and information technology is particularly expensive in the overall scheme of things, but that major platform costs dominate the Equipment Plan in the next decade leaving little room for this additional provision. Ironically, effective NEC would allow for better use of weapon systems and would therefore reduce the number of platforms required.⁵³

Within the context of the defence procurement budget at the time, questions were also raised about the affordability of the MOD's current proposals. One of the biggest criticisms centred on the affordability of NEC-enabling technologies within the forward equipment plan, which in itself was expected to create a 'bow wave' of programmes during 2008-2012 that already far exceeded the defence procurement budget. The then Director of RUSI, Rear Admiral Richard Cobbold, commented:

The trouble is that fewer platforms can be achieved at the stroke of a pen, whereas achieving a joint net-worked capability is a big challenge that cannot be met quickly. On past experience, achieving such a capability to time, cost and specifications, may be an insurmountable hurdle.⁵⁴

In an article in RUSI Journal the late Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden and General Sir David Ramsbotham commented:

If the funding for defence is set at a level which makes it impossible to cover all risks, then a difficult political judgement is required over how best to allocate limited funds. Merely slicing capabilities ever thinner is no longer an option. The UK is now at a stage where some major procurement projects need to be re-examined if today's essential capabilities are to be sustained. The defence budget is in crisis because of a string of flagship projects – including the Nimrod maritime reconnaissance aircraft, the Eurofighter, the Astute submarine and the Brimstone anti-armour missile – are overshooting their costs by around £3bn.⁵⁵

⁵² "Britain's future wars may be small but they will certainly not be cheap", The Times, 12 December 2003

⁵³ "UK defence directions", RUSI Defence Systems, Summer 2004

⁵⁴ Rear Admiral Richard Cobbold, "Only connections", RUSI Journal, August 2004, p.5

⁵⁵ Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden and General Sir David Ramsbotham, "About face – the British Armed Forces which way to turn?", RUSI Journal, May 2004

The sustainability of the decisions outlined as part of the Future Capabilities assessment also received much attention. In particular, the ability to sustain three concurrent expeditionary operations in addition to the UK's standing commitments with fewer platforms and personnel was questioned. While many analysts generally accepted this analysis, the sustainability of these planning assumptions appeared to rest on two premises: first, that there would be a commitment to only three concurrent operations at any one time; and secondly, that the UK's standing commitments, in particular military aid to the civil authorities, were predictable and therefore the force structure plans set out in the paper were adequate.

The White Paper suggested that involvement by the UK in any crisis would be determined by proximity, national interest and responsibility and, therefore, several analysts acknowledged that if there was overriding political willingness to commit troops and assets into a fourth theatre of operation, the sustainability of the UK's standing commitments, particularly those undertaken by the Navy, could come under pressure.

This again comes back to the argument that defence planning assumptions will always fall short of expectations if political objectives and aspirations dominate. Ellie Goldsworthy, then Head of the UK Armed Forces Programme at RUSI, argued:

Despite the reduction in infantry battalions, the Army is left pretty much intact and able to carry out all the tasks required of it according to MOD planning assumptions. The problem is that governments continue to get away with ignoring these assumptions and over-stretching the military [...]

For now, cutting military personnel is not a concern in itself as long as the resulting force structures are capable of carrying out the military tasks required. Furthermore the government of the day must not abuse its executive control of the military by asking more of it than it can deliver.⁴¹

10

Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) – 2010

Upon entering office in May 2010, one of the first actions of the Coalition Government was to establish a National Security Council and announce the conduct of a Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).⁵⁶ That review was described as one of the Government's top priorities, alongside addressing the budget deficit. It was published in tandem with a new National Security Strategy (NSS) in October 2010, five months after the Government took office.

Unlike previous reviews, which focused solely on how defence and the Armed Forces needed to be refigured in order to deliver on the UK's foreign policy objectives, the SDSR attempted to address security in the round, incorporating linked areas of policy including counter-terrorism, international aid and diplomacy, border and cyber security and homeland defence. It sought to establish both the processes through which the broader strategic goals of the UK could be attained and the balance of resources and capabilities needed to deliver these goals. The SDSR looked ahead to the 2020 timeframe, but the majority of recommendations and conclusions were deliberately focused on the period up to 2015, given the financial climate of the time.

While the detailed recommendations for each policy were stand-alone, they were linked by a number of overarching principles, reflecting the acknowledgment that defence and security issues could no longer be regarded as mutually exclusive. Specifically, these principles encompassed the idea of identifying and managing threats before they materialised in the UK, thereby placing greater emphasis on 'soft' power and conflict prevention through diplomacy and aid; maintaining a broad spectrum of military and other capabilities with sufficient flexibility to adjust to changing future requirements; and strengthening mutual dependence with key allies and partners and establishing a more coherent and integrated approach to security across government.

National security tasks and planning guidelines

In order to deliver on all of the objectives of the NSS and to establish the 'Adaptable' posture that the NSS advocated, the SDSR identified eight cross-cutting national security tasks:

⁵⁶ [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty – The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), Cm 7948

1. Identity and monitor national security risks and opportunities
2. Tackle at root the causes of instability, at home and abroad
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 its interests
5. Protect the UK and its interests, both overseas and domestically, from physical and electronic threats from state and non-state actors
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 to UK's overseas territories
7. Provide resilience for the UK by being prepared to respond to all kinds of emergencies, and maintain essential services
8. Work in alliances and partnerships wherever possible to generate stronger responses⁵⁷

Each was supplemented in the SDSR by a series of subsequent planning guidelines. The means by which these tasks were to be achieved, and the resources to be devoted to them over the subsequent five years, formed the main content of the SDSR.

Alliances and partnerships

The SDSR reiterated the fact that the UK rarely acts alone. Indeed, more effective alliances and partnerships – and not just those from the defence field – formed one of the overarching principles of the review.

The SDSR identified five key priorities for international engagement going forward, all of which cut across each of the policy areas under discussion.

- The pre-eminent defence and security relationship with the US
- New models of practical bilateral defence and security cooperation with a range of allies and partners
- An effective and reformed United Nations
- NATO as the bedrock of the UK's defence
- An outward-facing European Union that promotes security and prosperity

As well as reaffirming the UK's commitment to key bilateral defence and security relationships, the SDSR reiterated the importance of NATO and

⁵⁷ [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty – The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), Cm 7948, p11

noted that support for EU military operations would only occur “where it is clear that NATO is not planning to intervene”.

Defence and the Armed Forces

In the absence of a major review of defence policy in 12 years, the SDSR was portrayed as a unique opportunity to rebalance the UK’s defence priorities, commitments and spending. The conclusions of the NSS set down an important benchmark against which the reconfiguration of military capability was to be achieved. At the heart of the SDSR was also an awareness that the UK could not afford to do everything and therefore it was essential to prioritise what it does, where, when and with whom.

Operations in Afghanistan were to remain the priority until 2015. Therefore, the resources and capabilities required to meet the demands of that campaign were protected within the SDSR. The review also noted that the nature of warfare in 2020 and beyond was uncertain and it was vital to maintain capabilities that would allow the UK to react to the demands of a changing strategic environment.

The Defence Planning Assumptions and the configuration of the Armed Forces were revised accordingly. The blueprint for ‘Future Force 2020’ established a military that would be flexible, adaptable and expeditionary. The future force structure also provided the ability to deploy highly capable assets quickly, as well as preparing a greater scale and range of capability if required. The ability to regenerate capabilities was to be maintained, with greater operational co-operation sought with allies.

Several changes to the configuration of each of the Services were made. The recommendations were wide-ranging, with the most notable decisions being:

- The intention to decommission the UK’s current aircraft carriers and Harrier aircraft, thereby creating a 10-year gap in Carrier Strike capability.
- To continue with the procurement of the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carrier and procure the carrier-variant of the Joint Strike Fighter from 2020.⁵⁸
- To withdraw all British forces in Germany by 2020.
- Immediately cancel the Nimrod MRA4 programme.
- A reduced surface fleet of 19 frigates and destroyers: down four from 23.

⁵⁸ This decision was reversed in 2012, with the UK reverting to the short take-off and vertical landing B variant.

- The Armed Forces to be cut by 17,000 personnel in total: 7,000 losses in the Army; 5,000 in both the Royal Navy and RAF.
- To consider the implications of returning forces from Germany, before making a decision on the closures of RAF Kinloss and two other RAF bases identified as surplus to RAF requirements.

The speed of the review and the costs versus policy priorities debate inevitably opened up discussion on whether the conclusions of the SDSR could be considered strategic and, from a military perspective, whether they would leave the Armed Forces capable of meeting the national security objectives set down in the National Security Strategy.

A more detailed analysis of the 2010 SDSR is available in Library Research Paper RP11/10, [UK Defence and Security Policy: A New Approach?](#), January 2011.

Army 2020 and Future Reserves

Shortly after the SDSR was published, the Army conducted a “three-month exercise” which resulted in further, significant reductions in the size of the forces.⁵⁹ The Army was to reduce in size not to 94,000 personnel (a loss of 7,000) but to 82,000 regular personnel, a loss of nearly 20,000. This was accompanied by a pledge to increase the newly renamed Army Reserve (no longer the Territorial Army) to 30,000.

This prompted the Army to announce a new structure: Army 2020. This envisaged an Army split into a Reaction Force and an Adaptable Force, supported by Force Troops. 23 units were disbanded or amalgamated, resulting in 17 fewer units in all. The Army basing programme reorganised army units in the UK to accommodate those returning from Germany and consolidate around seven major centres in the UK – for example, armoured infantry around Salisbury Plain. Library briefing papers [Army 2020](#), [Army Basing Review 2013](#), [UK withdrawal from Germany: the end of an era](#) and [Future Reserves 2020](#) look at these in more detail.

Reforming the Ministry of Defence

Alongside the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), the Government also announced that it would conduct a full organisational review of the Ministry of Defence. Lord Levene subsequently published his proposals for reorganising the Ministry of Defence in 2011. Measures that have come into effect include a smaller head office, a restructured Defence Board and the creation of a new Joint Forces Command to strengthen the development of joint capabilities (like medical services, information systems) and joint warfare development.

⁵⁹ See “[Armed Forces redundancies](#)”, House of Commons Library, SN05961, 24 January 2014

Separately, the Government legislated in the Defence Reform Act 2014 to outsource Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S), the body responsible for buying and supporting equipment for the Armed Forces. However, Government plans to convert DE&S into a Government-owned Contractor-operated entity were put on hold in late 2013 when only one consortia formally submitted a bid.

More information on the specific recommendations of the 2010 SDSR is available in Library briefing paper [UK defence and Security Policy: A new approach?](#), 21 January 2011.

11

The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review

The 2010 SDSR committed to undertake further reviews every five years, timed to coincide with the expected five-yearly election cycle.

The new Government duly unveiled its [National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) (Cm 9161) in November 2015 (hereafter SDSR).

National Security Objectives and main challenges

The most notable change was combining the NSS and SDSR into one document. This enabled a clear connection between the overarching strategy and the specific policies and capabilities that flow from it. The strategy was distilled into three ‘National Security Objectives’:

1. protect our people
2. project our global influence
3. promote our prosperity

The strategy set out four main challenges which “are likely to drive UK security priorities for the coming decade”:

- The increasing threat posed by terrorism, extremism and instability
- The resurgence of state-based threats; and intensifying wider state competition
- The impact of technology, especially cyber threats; and wider technological developments
- The erosion of the rules-based international order, making it harder to build consensus and tackle global threats

The strategy also set out a number of other risks “which remain important and need to be addressed”. They were: civil emergencies; major natural disasters overseas; energy security; the global economy; and climate change and resource scarcity.

An Annex to the strategy document summarises the 2015 National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) which has shaped the new strategy. This assessment places the domestic and overseas risks faced by the UK into three tiers, “according to judgement of both likelihood and impact”.

The Armed Forces

The SDSR recommitted the UK Armed Forces to be “world-leading”, able to project power globally and deter or defeat adversaries. It set the Armed Forces eight missions (see box 1). The Armed Forces’ role in projecting soft power globally is interwoven throughout the SDSR. The SDSR announced defence engagement will become a “funded, core MOD task for the first time”. Supporting exports was also made a core task for the MOD.

Box 1: The SDSR sets the Armed Forces eight missions

1. Defend and contribute to the security and resilience of the UK and Overseas Territories
2. Provide the nuclear deterrent
3. Contribute to improved understanding of the world through strategic intelligence and the global defence network
4. Reinforce international security and the collective capacity of our allies, partners and multilateral institutions
5. Support humanitarian assistance and disaster response, and conduct rescue missions
6. Conduct strike operations
7. Conduct operations to restore peace and stability
8. Conduct major combat operations if required, including under NATO Article 5

After a period of redundancies and reductions in size, the SDSR pledged to maintain the size of the regular Armed Forces and not reduce the Army below 82,000. This was welcomed by those who feared further manpower reductions. However, this did not dampen ongoing concerns about personnel numbers, especially as the Army is below the 82,000 regular personnel target set for 2020.⁶⁰

The SDSR also unveiled plans to improve the terms and conditions for personnel and recruits. The Government has reported to Parliament annually on the Armed Forces Covenant.

The SDSR outlined a new force structure building on the Future Force 2020 model unveiled in its 2010 predecessor. Renamed Joint Force 2025 it will

⁶⁰ UK regular army forces numbered 79,330 in 1 October 2019, [UK Armed Forces Quarterly Service Personnel Statistics 1 October 2019](#), 21 November 2019

provide, if required, an expeditionary force of 50,000 personnel. When not deployed at this scale the Armed Forces will be expected to undertake a large number of smaller operations simultaneously.

Reaction

Initial reaction to the 2015 NSS/SDSR focused overwhelmingly on the specific policies and capabilities flowing from the overarching strategy. It quickly became known publicly simply as the SDSR.

For some, the apparent semi-eclipse of the 2015 UK NSS could be interpreted as reflecting a sense that the overarching strategy agreed in 2010 has merely been refreshed, rather than transformed. For others, it might also flow from a feeling that, having invested considerable energy in debating what strategy is “for” between 2010 and 2015, many politicians and commentators have decided that few solid conclusions arose from that debate.⁶¹

“The SDSR 15 was not properly funded”.

Ben Wallace,
Secretary of State
for Defence

23 October 2019

The initial reaction to the SDSR from the defence community was broadly positive, not least because unlike its 2010 predecessor, it focused on what the Armed Forces would gain rather than what would be cut. Headline decisions included the long-called for reinstatement of a maritime patrol aircraft capability and two new classes (rather than one) of frigates.

A substantial increase in money allocated to the ten-year equipment plan, from £166bn (announced only a month before) to £178bn, was widely welcomed.⁶²

However, doubts about the affordability of the plan soon emerged. The National Audit Office has criticised the reliance on making efficiency savings in existing programmes to fund the new commitments. In 2017 the NAO warned: “the risks to the affordability of the Ministry of Defence Equipment Plan are greater than at any point since reporting began in 2012”.⁶³ The NAO says the 2018 and 2019 equipment plans are unaffordable.

The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, looking back at the SDSR in 2018, said:

In relation to defence, the 2015 NSS & SDSR perpetuated a longstanding failure to match ambition with capabilities and funding, relying instead on unrealistic promises of efficiencies and reduced contingency funding.⁶⁴

⁶¹ For further discussion of the NSS see Library briefing paper [‘The 2015 National Security Strategy’](#), CBP07431, 14 December 2015

⁶² [Defence Equipment Plan 2015](#), 22 October 2015

⁶³ [“The equipment plan 2016-2026”](#), National Audit Office, 27 January 2017

⁶⁴ [“National Security Capability Review: A changing security environment”](#), Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 23 March 2018, HC 756 2017-19; see also [“Revisiting the UK’s national security strategy: The National Security Capability Review and the Modernising Defence Programme”](#), Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 15 July 2019, HC 2072, 2017-19, p7

This view was repeated by the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, who told the Defence Committee in October 2019 “the SDSR was not properly funded, in my view” adding “it was an ambition that did not have the funding attached”.⁶⁵

The Defence Committee had previously questioned whether Joint Force 2025 was achievable:

The fundamental problem is that the personnel and equipment requirements of Joint Force 2025 that were laid down [in] the 2015 SDSR were insufficiently funded and consequently are unaffordable under the current settlement.⁶⁶

11.1

Post-2017 election reviews: the National Security Capabilities Review and the Modernising Defence Programme

The 2017 election prompted some debate as to whether a fresh review was needed – not least to take into account the result of the 2016 EU referendum and continued concerns about Russia’s aggressive behaviour.⁶⁷

However, the May Government opted instead for a National Security Capability Review (NSCR), to be led by the National Security Advisor. Defence was initially included within the Review but in early 2018 was split off to become the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP).

The NSCR, published in March 2018, updates the SDSR’s assessment of the challenges likely to drive UK Security priorities and outlined a new national security doctrine: the Fusion Doctrine. The NSCR acknowledged the world “has become more uncertain and volatile since 2015” and challenges at home and abroad have grown more complex. The NSCR does not revise any of the SDSR’s principal commitments.

Defence was separated into a separate strand, the results of which were published as the Modernising Defence Programme in December 2018. It is a relatively short document that firstly recounts developments in defence since 2015 and assesses current and future threats before identifying three broad areas it will now prioritise, tagged under the headings Mobilise, Modernising and Transform.

⁶⁵ [Oral evidence from the new Defence Secretary](#), Defence Committee, 23 October 2019, HC 179 2019

⁶⁶ “Beyond 2 per cent: a preliminary report on the Modernising Defence Programme”, Defence Committee, 18 June 2018, HC 818 2017-19, para 29

⁶⁷ See for example Professor Malcolm Chalmers, [“Would a new SDSR be needed after a Brexit vote?”](#), RUSI briefing papers, 3 June 2016

Reaction was muted. The shadow Defence Secretary said it was “underwhelming” and failed to address the MOD’s budgetary issues, while SNP Defence spokesman described the conclusions as “extremely thin.”⁶⁸ The Joint Committee on National Security Strategy was similarly downbeat, suggesting the MDP “raised more questions than it answered.”⁶⁹

Relevant Library papers

More information on the specific recommendations of the 2015 SDSR is available in Library briefings [The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) and [The 2015 UK National Security Strategy](#). In addition, Library briefing [The Modernising Defence Programme](#) looks at the main conclusions of the MDP. Further Library briefing papers are available in the defence section of the [Library’s website](#).

⁶⁸ [HC Deb 18 December 2018 c660 - 662](#)

⁶⁹ [“Revisiting the UK’s national security strategy: The National Security Capability Review and the Modernising Defence Programme”](#), 15 July 2019, HC 2072, 2017-19, para 36

12

The 2021 Integrated Review

Following the election in 2019, the Boris Johnson Government laid out its intention to conduct an “integrated, security, defence and foreign policy review” that set out the Government’s ambition for the UK’s role in the world.⁷⁰

Momentum for a new review had been building for some time, and not just because the timing of the election coincided with the quinquennial precedent set in the 2010 SDSR. One aspect was the changing security environment; the Chief of the Defence Staff spoke of a return to an era of great power competition.⁷¹ The wider context is discussed in Library paper [The Integrated Review: A look ahead to the Government’s review](#) (CBP 9052).

In November 2020 the Prime Minister gave a statement to the House saying the review will conclude “[early next year](#)”. He also announced a multi-year spending settlement for defence, increasing defence spending by £24.1 billion over the next four years.⁷²

12.1

The creation of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

One major decision made prior to the conclusion of the Integrated Review was to merge the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) into a new department, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the distinctions between diplomacy and development objectives were artificial and outdated and that the FCDO will allow development decisions to be better aligned with foreign policy objectives. He said the “long overdue reform” would ensure “maximum value” for taxpayers.⁷³

⁷⁰ [Queen’s Speech](#), 19 December 2019; [HCWS126](#), 26 February 2020

⁷¹ [Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture](#), RUSI, 5 December 2019

⁷² [PM statement to the House on the Integrated Review](#), Prime Minister’s office, 19 November 2020

⁷³ [HC Deb 16 June 2020](#), c666

The decision was widely criticised, including by three former Prime Ministers.⁷⁴ David Cameron said more could be done to coordinate aid and foreign policy, including through the National Security Council, but that closing DFID would mean “less expertise, less voice for development at the top table and ultimately less respect for the UK overseas.”⁷⁵

12.2 Publication of the Integrated Review

The Government published its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#), on 16 March 2021. Two further papers followed: a Defence Command Paper, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) (22 March) and a [Defence and Security Industrial Strategy](#) (23 March).

Prime Minister’s vision for the UK in 2030

In his introduction to the Integrated Review, the Prime Minister sets out his overarching vision for “Global Britain” within the next decade:⁷⁶

- The UK will play “a more active part” in sustaining an international order in which open societies and economies continue to flourish.
- The UK will sit at the heart of a network of “like minded countries and flexible groupings” committed to protecting human rights and upholding global norms.
- The UK will embrace innovation in science and technology to boost national prosperity and strategic advantage.
- The UK will be a “soft power” superpower.
- The UK will continue to take a leading role in security, diplomacy and development, conflict resolution and poverty reduction. The UK aims to be a model for an integrated approach to tackling global challenges.
- As a maritime trading nation, the UK will be a global champion of free and fair trade. The openness of the UK’s economy will be protected from corruption, manipulation, exploitation and the theft of intellectual property.

⁷⁴ [“Leadership of merged DFID evidence of ‘hostile takeover’ by FCO, say critics”](#), The Guardian, 25 August 2020

⁷⁵ [“UK will lose respect overseas”](#), The Independent, 16 June 2020

⁷⁶ [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), CP 403, 16 March 2021

- Climate change and tackling biodiversity loss will be a priority for the UK on the international agenda.
- The UK's diplomatic service, armed forces and security and intelligence services will be the most effective and innovative, relative to their size. They will be characterised by agility, responsiveness and digital integration. There will be a greater emphasis on engaging, training and assisting others.
- The UK will retain its nuclear deterrent. Its military capabilities will have global reach and be integrated across all five operational domains. The UK will develop a dynamic space programme and be one of the world's "leading democratic cyber powers".⁷⁷

A more competitive and multipolar world

The review states that the nature and distribution of global power is changing as the world becomes more competitive and multipolar. It says the UK must also prepare for the possibility that a post-Covid world will be even more contested and fragmented than expected, where global cooperation is reduced and there are increasing challenges to an open global economy, thereby making it harder for the UK to defend its values and interests.

There will be a change in the UK's approach to the international order. Recognising that the international order is now more fragmented and characterised by competition between states "over interests, norms and values", the UK will take a more dynamic approach. Instead of defending the status quo of the rules-based international order, the UK will "reinforce parts of the international architecture that are under threat" and work with others to shape the international order of the future.

The review also indicated a tilt toward the Indo-Pacific, in recognition of the region's growing importance. By 2030 the UK will be "deeply engaged" as the "European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually beneficial trade, shared security and values".⁷⁸

Threat assessment

The review describes China as the "biggest state-based threat to the UK's economic security."⁷⁹ This was a notable change in language from the 2015 SDSR, which outlined an ambition to "build a deeper partnership with

⁷⁷ [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), CP 403, 16 March 2021

⁷⁸ [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), CP 403, 16 March 2021

⁷⁹ [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), CP 403, 16 March 2021

China.”⁸⁰ The integrated review says the impact of China’s military modernisation and “growing international assertiveness” within the Indo-Pacific region and beyond will pose an “increasing risk to UK interests”.⁸¹

Russia “remains the most acute threat to our security” in the Euro-Atlantic region. The UK will work with NATO Allies to ensure a “united Western response” and will support “closer practical cooperation” between NATO and the EU in pursuit of this goal.⁸²

Raising the cap on the UK’s nuclear stockpile

One of the main headlines of the Government's Integrated Review was the decision to raise the cap on the UK's nuclear stockpile, for the first time since the end of the Cold War.

The review concludes that the current security environment necessitates a move away from the previous decision in the 2010 SDSR to reduce the UK’s nuclear stockpile to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s. The UK will now move toward an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads, an increase of just over 40%.

Following the change, the UK will remain the smallest of the NPT-recognised nuclear weapon states, but it will also join China as the only members of the recognised nuclear weapon states (the P5) to be seen to be quantitatively increasing their nuclear stockpiles.

A “persistent posture” for the armed forces

The review makes clear the armed forces will be deployed overseas more often and for longer periods of time “to train, exercise and operate alongside allies and partners across all our priority regions”.

Threats at home and overseas will be countered by “using our armed forces to disrupt and deter through persistent engagement overseas”.

The review says a greater global presence “will improve our understanding of events, help us to detect and tackle problems earlier, and give us a foundation to respond more assertively to threats”.

Persistent engagement will allow the UK to “build the capacity of others to deter and defend against state threats” and “support, mentor and, where necessary, assist nations in countering non-state challenges”.

“Previous reviews have been over-ambitious and under-funded, leaving forces that were overstretched and under-equipped.”

Defence Command Paper, 2021

⁸⁰ [National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), Cm 9161, 23 November 2015

⁸¹ [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), CP 403, 16 March 2021

⁸² [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), CP 403, 16 March 2021

12.3

The Defence Command Paper

The Government published an accompanying Defence Command Paper, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), on 22 March 2021.

In the foreword, Ben Wallace, the Defence Secretary, criticises previous reviews for being “over-ambitious and under-funded”, leaving forces “overstretched and under-equipped.”

The Command Paper draws on the Government’s assessment of major trends laid out in the Integrated Review. It repeats the four overarching trends which will be of particular importance to the UK and the changing international order: geo-political and geo-economic shifts; systemic competition; rapid technological change; transnational challenges requiring collective action. It similarly repeats analysis of the blurring of the distinctions between war and peace, home and away, state and non-state, virtual and real.

The paper describes Russia as posing the “greatest nuclear, conventional military and sub-threshold threat to European security.” Russia is both a “capable and unpredictable actor” because of the modernisation of its armed forces, its ability to integrate whole of state activity and its “greater appetite for risk.”

China’s rising power is considered the “most significant geopolitical factor in the world today.” An increasing challenge will come from China’s military modernisation (which is proceeding faster than any other nation) and growing international assertiveness within the Indo-Pacific region.

The paper examines the future battlefield, observing that the UK’s historical technological advantage is being eroded: “several states are developing land systems... that can exceed the capabilities of many NATO nations in range and lethality.”

The paper says the changes being made will ensure the armed forces are more agile, more lethal and more integrated. There will be more money spent on R&D spending, greater focus on experimentation and a faster acquisition programme. Money will be invested to improve readiness, resilience and sustainability of the armed forces.

Integrated Force 2030

The Command Paper described an Integrated Force 2030, replacing the Joint Force 2025 and Future Force 2020 laid out in the Strategic Defence and Security Reviews of [2015](#) and [2010](#) respectively. However, unlike in those two reviews, Integrated Force 2030 did not come with a clear force structure - there were no numbers attached to specific capabilities or units.

The government set out plans to spend £188 billion on defence over the next four years. Included in this spending are affirmations of existing equipment programmes and investment in new and emerging technologies for the UK armed forces.

Equipment cuts

Like in previous defence reviews, the Command Paper announced the early retirement of navy vessels and several types of aircraft and cancelled the sustainment programme for one of the army's armoured infantry vehicles (Warrior). Some capabilities will be replaced by newer iterations, though not immediately. The government also reversed some of the decisions of the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review to extend the life of some capabilities. The Economist observed "many of the cuts create gaps that will not be filled for years."⁸³

These are discussed greater detail in Commons Library briefing [Defence Command Paper 2021: Equipment cuts](#).

Army numbers cut to 73,000

Following on from IR21 and CP21, the Army unveiled what it described as its "most radical programme of transformation" in over two decades.⁸⁴ Future Soldier set out the future roles for Army units, where they will be based and when the changes will take effect.

The MOD announced a reduction in full-time trade trained strength army personnel from 76,000 to 72,500 by 2025, although that figure was later increased to 73,000 in Future Soldier. Altogether, the Army envisages a total force of over 100,000 personnel, including 30,100 reservists.⁸⁵

Defence and Security Industrial Strategy

On 23 March 2021 the Ministry of Defence published the [Defence and Security Industrial Strategy](#) (DSIS). This outlined a new approach to defence procurement, replacing the former policy of "global competition by default" with a "more flexible and nuanced approach".

Further reading

The Library produced a series of papers examining the Integrated Review and Command Paper. These include short overviews as well as examinations of the UK's nuclear stockpile, defence cuts and emerging defence technologies, the defence aspect of the tilt to the Indo-Pacific, and

⁸³ "Defence cuts make Britain's armed forces leaner but not meaner", The Economist, 27 March 2021

⁸⁴ British Army, [Future Soldier unveils radical transformation for the British Army](#), 25 November 2021

⁸⁵ British Army, [Future Soldier unveils radical transformation for the British Army](#), 25 November 2021

international development. These are collated on one Library webpage: [The Integrated Review 2021](#).

13

The Integrated Review refresh: 2023

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and calls for the integrated review to be revisited, then Prime Minister Liz Truss announced to a refresh of the review in September 2022. The refresh was published in March 2023 under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, followed in July by a refreshed defence command paper.

13.1

Calls for a refresh

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent ramifications for energy security and global food supplies, led to some calls to look again at the Integrated Review.

The Foreign Affairs Select Committee and the Lords International Affairs and Defence Select Committee discussed the proposed refresh in reports published in December 2022 and January 2023 respectively. Both committees made recommendations to inform the refresh.

The Foreign Affairs Committee said the refresh provides an "important opportunity for the Government to revisit the assumptions underpinning the original IR". However, it should not be "based on empty rhetoric or overly-ambitious posturing." The Committee called on the Government to clarify the nature of its security relationship with the EU, to address the sustainability of competing with China in some areas and cooperating in others, and to enhancing the resilience of the UK. The Committee also argued that it is the Defence Command Paper and Defence and Security Industrial Strategy that require the most updating.⁸⁶

The Lords International Affairs and Defence Committee argued the Russian invasion of Ukraine "has fundamentally changed the European security environment." The Committee said the combination of the war, hostility to Western interests in parts of Asia, and a worsening economic outlook, has created "circumstances graver than anything the UK has faced since the height of the Cold War." However, the Committee also exercised caution in conclusively drawing lessons from the battlefield in Ukraine, given the conflict is ongoing and the outcome uncertain. The Committee expressed concern about defence spending, given the high levels of inflation and foreign exchange rates, and over-committing defence resources to the Indo-

⁸⁶ [Refreshing our approach? Updating the Integrated Review](#), Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 882 2022-23, 18 December 2022

Pacific “at a time when the European security environment is deteriorating.”⁸⁷

The Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, in a speech at the defence think tank RUSI, remarked that while the IR “proved remarkably prescient” and stood up well when measured against previous strategies, it was important to have “the humility to recognise what has changed.”⁸⁸

13.2

Announcement of the refresh

On 21 September 2022 then Prime Minister Liz Truss committed to producing a refresh of the Integrated Review (IR) by the end of 2022. The review continued under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

A Cabinet Office Minister explained in a written answer in October that the refresh will “supplement and extend” the IR rather than replace it. Chris Philps explained that the refresh has two core aims:

- to review changes in the strategic context since publication of the IR; and
- to adjust the UK’s overarching approach and its priorities for action to 2025, including in line with the new Prime Minister’s specific priorities.⁸⁹

Downing Street said the update of the IR will “take account of the huge geopolitical shifts” that have taken place since March 2021, including “the sharpening of inter-state competition due to the actions of countries like Russia, China and Iran.”⁹⁰

The National Security Advisor, Sir Tim Barrow, said the update’s purpose is to refine the IR’s strategic objectives:

The purpose of the update will be to refine the IR’s strategic objectives in response to the rapid and profound acceleration of systemic competition, which – combined with the energy security, climate and nature crises – is having a deep impact on the day-to-day lives of the British people, not least their affordable access to food, energy and other basic needs.⁹¹

⁸⁷ [UK defence policy: from aspiration to reality?](#), International Relations and Defence Committee (PDF), HL Paper 124 2022-23, 12 January 2023

⁸⁸ [Chief of the Defence Staff RUSI lecture 2022](#), Ministry of Defence, 14 December 2022

⁸⁹ [PQ61051 \[Integrated Review\]](#), 18 October 2022

⁹⁰ [Prime Minister: “freedom and openness have never been achieved by standing still”](#). Prime Minister’s Office, 28 November 2022

⁹¹ [Correspondence from the National Security Adviser relating to the Integrated Review Update, dated 9 December 2022](#) (PDF), Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 12 December 2022

The refresh is being led by the Cabinet Office, headed by Professor John Bew, who led the original IR process.⁹²

13.3 Call for submissions

In a call for submissions issued in March 2023, the Secretary of State's Office of Net Assessment and Challenge (SONAC) said it intended to examine "root and branch" of defence, to "maximise our efficiency and strategic impact".

The call for submissions explicitly cited the lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, how to "maximise the effectiveness of a lean budget" and a "potentially higher allocation of GDP in the future."

SONAC asked for submissions on how UK Defence can deliver enhanced strategic value for itself and its Allies; whether the UK should adhere to the same priorities as those of the past, and if not, what must the UK change; and how Defence can increase delivery at greater speed and effectiveness.⁹³

13.4 Publication dates

On 13 March the government published [Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world](#) (IR23). The government published an update to the Defence Command Paper, [Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world](#), on 18 July 2023.

13.5 Main points of the refresh

The IR23 affirmed many of the trends shaping the international environment identified in IR21: shifts in the distribution of global power; inter-state 'systemic' competition over the nature of the international order; rapid technological change; and worsening transnational challenges.

However, the government said the "transition into a multipolar, fragmented and contested world has happened more quickly and definitively than anticipated".

IR23 builds on the approach of IR21, setting out the next steps in delivering on its aims, against the backdrop of a "more volatile and contested world."

⁹² [Correspondence from the National Security Adviser relating to the Integrated Review Update, dated 9 December 2022](#) (PDF), Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 12 December 2022

⁹³ MOD, [Call for submissions to shape the next Defence Command Paper](#), 23 March 2023

It reaffirms the UK's core national interests, articulated in previous reviews as the sovereignty, security and prosperity of the British people, and adds "[the higher goal of an open and stable international order](#)." The ways in which the UK will achieve these ends are divided into four pillars:

1. Shape the international environment.
2. Deter, defend and compete across all domains.
3. Address vulnerabilities through resilience.
4. Generate strategic advantage.

IR23 states the security of the Euro-Atlantic is a "core priority" and the "primary theatre" to which the UK will commit the majority of its defence capabilities.

Russia was identified in IR21 the "most acute direct threat to the UK" in the Euro-Atlantic region. Following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the 2023 refresh concludes "we cannot discount the possibility of an attack against Allies' sovereignty and territorial integrity" and says that the security of the Euro-Atlantic area is now "[intrinsicly linked to the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine](#)". It also described China as posing an "epoch-defining challenge to the type of international order we want to see".

IR23 did not make any recommendations for changes to the armed forces.

The Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, said the refresh was "[overdue but welcome](#)", noting "this is a challenging moment for our security and that of our allies and for our place in the world." However, he also said the refresh "[does not answer growing questions concerning capability gaps that weaken our national defence and undermine the UK's NATO contribution](#)".

Commons Library briefing [The Integrated Review Refresh 2023: What has changed since 2021?](#) discusses further the main themes of the refresh.

13.6 The UK's nuclear deterrent

The 2023 IR refresh made no changes to the UK's nuclear posture. It confirmed the ongoing commitment to the replacement of the UK's nuclear deterrent from the 2030s onwards, including the delivery of the Dreadnought ballistic missile submarine programme and the replacement warhead programme.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Both of these programmes are examined in Library briefings: [Replacing the UK's nuclear deterrent: Progress of the Dreadnought class](#) and [Replacing the UK's nuclear deterrent: The long-awaited warhead decision](#)

CP23 reaffirms the UK's commitment to a minimum, credible, independent nuclear deterrent based on a continuous at sea posture and assigned to the defence of NATO.

13.7 Defence spending

Ahead of the Spring budget and the publication of the 2023 refresh of the Integrated Review, the Prime Minister announced that defence spending would increase by £5 billion over the next two years (2023/24 and 2024/25).⁹⁵

This additional funding was then confirmed in the Spring Budget on 15 March 2023, and a further £2 billion per year in subsequent years up to 2027/28 was also announced, adding a total of £11 billion to the defence budget over this five-year period.⁹⁶

The government said the additional funding will help modernise the UK's nuclear capabilities and fund the next phase of the AUKUS submarine programme (£3 billion), and replenish stockpiles (£2 billion).⁹⁷

During a visit to Poland in April 2024, [the Prime Minister confirmed that the UK would reach the 2.5% target by 2030](#). This plan is outlined in the ['Defending Britain' policy paper](#).

A more detailed discussion of the defence budget can be found in Commons Library briefing [UK defence spending](#).

13.8 Main points of defence command paper refresh

The return of major war to the continent of Europe, Ben Wallace wrote in the foreword, requires the UK to sharpen its approach: to ensure its warfighting capabilities are “robust and credible”, able to fight and win if they do; and that the UK has the necessary stockpiles to support such action. He called for “ruthless prioritisation and improved productivity”.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Downing Street, [Press release](#), 13 March 2023

⁹⁶ HM Treasury, [Spring Budget 2023](#), March 2023, para 2.7

⁹⁷ Cabinet Office, [Integrated Review Refresh 2023](#), CP 811, 13 March 2023, p34

⁹⁸ Ministry of Defence, [Defence Command Paper 2023; Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world](#), CP 901, 18 July 2023

The paper articulates a “new, clear purpose for Defence: **to protect the nation, and to help it prosper**” (emphasis as in original). The paper identifies four priorities, set out in the table below.

The command paper’s four priorities for defence	
What?	How?
Protect the UK, its Crown Dependencies, and its Overseas Territories, and contribute to the collective deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area: able to deter and, if necessary, defend against and defeat, attacks on the UK homeland (including our Overseas Territories) and our NATO Allies.	By modernising our strategic nuclear deterrent, delivering a credible warfighting force, enhancing our contribution to NATO, accelerating modernisation of the force, continuing to support Ukraine, and increasing our investment in homeland defence and national resilience.
Pursue a campaigning approach to counter the threats from state and non-state actors, wherever they manifest in the world, working in an integrated way with allies and partners to achieve focused and impactful results.	By embedding campaigning as the way Defence delivers its effect, integrating all the levers of defence power in a targeted approach, with allies and partners, and across Government, enabling forward deployment and persistent presence, and developing exportable expertise.
Pursue a campaigning approach to counter the threats from state and non-state actors, wherever they manifest in the world, working in an integrated way with allies and partners to achieve focused and impactful results.	By collaborating with our core network of democratic allies and partners, building deeper relationships with influential ‘middle-ground powers’, investing in and exploiting our existing permanent presence, and maximising the benefit from pulsed deployments, defence diplomacy, capability collaboration and defence exports.
Secure strategic advantage, achieve greater economic and industrial resilience, and contribute to national prosperity.	By investing in our people, exploiting innovation in digital, data and science & technology, forging a closer relationship with industry, improving our acquisition processes, adopting an activist approach to defence exports, and maximising our productivity, enhancing readiness and lethality.

Source: Ministry of Defence, [Defence Command Paper 2023; Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world](#), CP 901, 18 July 2023

The paper is split into two parts.

The first, entitled 'securing and maintaining our strategic advantage', discusses people; the use of science, innovation and technology, industry and productivity. This reflects in part the shift in focus since Ukraine to ensuring the armed forces are able to fight and can be sustained in such a fight; the conflict in Ukraine having exposed both gaps in stockpiles of munitions and the lack of industrial capability to accelerate munition production at short notice.

The second part sets out the UK's operational ambition, outlining how the armed forces seek to deter and defend. The paper sets out the need to "enhance integration": across all Services, domains, government, industry, regional theatres and with allies and partners.

The force structure laid out in the 2021 command paper remains unchanged.

Unlike previous iterations, the command paper explicitly did not make any new commitments on platforms and capabilities. Instead, Ben Wallace explained, the focus is on driving the lessons of Ukraine into the core business of defence, to "recover the warfighting resilience needed to generate credible conventional deterrence".⁹⁹

However, the paper also sets out plans to accelerate the programme of modernisation and mobilisation, and explicitly commits to "addressing shortfalls in capabilities where a less contested and less volatile world meant we were able to take greater risk".

The paper also lays out an evolution from persistent engagement overseas to a "global campaigning approach". The command paper explains this approach will be enabled by a dedicated budget to "respond rapidly and seize opportunities" as they emerge. A new Global Response Force will be created to bring together deployed and high-readiness forces. This will be "optimised for rapid, global effect".

In a statement in the Commons, Ben Wallace described how he wants Defence to be "threat-led" and for the MOD to be a "campaigning department", with a more "proactive posture". He also spoke of the need for defence to be sustainable:

For too long, Defence was hollowed out by both Labour and Conservative Governments, leaving our forces overstretched and underequipped. We must

⁹⁹ Ministry of Defence, [Defence Command Paper 2023; Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world](#), CP 901, 18 July 2023

match our ambitions to our resources, our equipment plans to our budget, and take care of our people to sustain them in their duties.¹⁰⁰

Reaction and commentary

John Healey, then Shadow Defence Secretary, said the plan was “not a good enough response to war in Europe.” He welcomed what he described as a “back to basics” element of the plan, with the focus on stockpiles, training, service conditions and more combat-readiness. However, he also suggested the plan is “driven by costs, not by threats”.¹⁰¹ Owen Thompson, speaking on behalf of the SNP, welcomed the prominence given to people in the refresh.¹⁰²

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman told the Defence Committee that the command paper is less a plan of action, more a “series of long essays”, with few clearly identified assessable outcomes.¹⁰³

Douglas Barrie, senior fellow for military aerospace at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, noted the discussion of spiral development for future procurements; enabling new capabilities to be brought into service quickly, if required, and then upgraded to its full capability. Spiral development is also intended to future-proof new procurements, to ensure they can be easily upgraded as new technologies emerge and evolve. Though he also cautioned that, with a general election expected: “this ‘refresh’ may be out of date before much change can happen”.¹⁰⁴

The defence think tank RUSI compiled a panel of three former senior officials (Will Jessett, Tom McKane and Peter Watkins) at the Ministry of Defence who were closely involved in previous defence reviews to assess the command paper. They observed that, because of fiscal constraints, the command paper centres on “policy ideas and approaches rather than on new capabilities”. They also note that while the paper sets out high level goals, it is light on detail and, they argue, gives no clear sense of prioritisation. They suggest a future review – which at the time of writing they expect to be undertaken in 2025 – should consider how to identify and prioritise key outcomes and build in “robust implantation and monitoring functions” to ensure they are being delivered effectively.¹⁰⁵

Further responses to the refresh can be found in House of Lords Library briefing [UK defence policy and the role of the armed forces](#).

¹⁰⁰ [HC Deb 18 July 2023 c785](#)

¹⁰¹ [HC Deb 18 July 2023 c789](#)

¹⁰² [HC Deb 18 July 2023 c793](#)

¹⁰³ Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The Defence Command Paper 2023](#), HC 1804, 5 September 2024

¹⁰⁴ Douglas Barrie and Robert Wall, [UK Defence Command Paper aims to provide marching orders for industry](#), IISS Military Balance blog, 28 July 2023

¹⁰⁵ Will Jessett, Tom McKane and Peter Watkins, [Putting the UK Defence Command Paper Refresh into context](#), RUSI, 21 August 2023

2 Further reading

- Will Jessett, Tom McKane and Peter Watkins, [Putting the UK Defence Command Paper Refresh into context](#), RUSI, 21 August 2023
- [UK defence policy: from aspiration to reality?](#), International Relations and Defence Committee (PDF), HL Paper 124 2022-23, 12 January 2023
- [Refreshing our approach? Updating the Integrated Review](#), Foreign Affairs Committee, HC 882 2022-23, 18 December 2022
- [The Integrated Review in context: One year on](#), School of Security Studies and Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London, October 2022
- [The Integrated Review in context: Defence and security in focus](#), School of Security Studies and Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London, October 2021
- [The UK's national security machinery](#), Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, HC 231 2021-22, 19 September 2021
- [The Integrated Review in context: A strategy fit for the 2020s](#) (PDF), School of Security Studies and Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London, July 2021

14

Labour government (2024 to present)

The Labour party election manifesto committed to undertake a strategic defence review within the party's first year in office.¹⁰⁶

The new Labour government announced a new strategic defence review on 16 July 2024, the day before the King's Speech. The government said the review will "consider the threats Britain faces, the capabilities needed to meet them, the state of UK armed forces and the resources available."¹⁰⁷

14.1

External reviewers

The review will be overseen by Defence Secretary John Healey, but led by three external reviewers in what the government described as a "first of its kind" for UK defence:

- The review lead is Lord Robertson. He was Defence Secretary for the 1998 Strategic Defence Review and then Secretary General of NATO (1999 to 2003).
- Dr Fiona Hill, a British-American foreign policy expert and former National Security Council staffer in the Trump administration, and an intelligence analyst in both the Bush and Obama administrations (2006 to 2009).¹⁰⁸
- General Sir Richard Barrons, former Commander Joint Forces Command (2013 to 2016) and former Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (2011 to 2013).

14.2

Engagement and consultation

The government said it will engage widely across the defence community and submissions will be invited until the end of September 2024.

¹⁰⁶ [Labour election manifesto 2024](#)

¹⁰⁷ Ministry of Defence, [New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK Armed Forces](#), 16 July 2024

¹⁰⁸ [Trump advisor Fiona Hill to lead UK defence review](#), Politico, 16 July 2024

14.3 Terms of reference

The review will consider all aspects of defence but will not consider other aspects of national security policy.¹⁰⁹

The [terms of reference](#) identified some of the key issues for the review to consider, including: the strategic and operational context, the force structure needed to create “integrated multi-domain” defence capability; use of digital age technologies; strengthening international alliances and partnerships; recruitment, education and retention of personnel; modernising the defence estate; and the state of the defence technological and industrial base.¹¹⁰

The review will also identify where “reprioritisation of roles, capabilities, activities, and support may be made”.¹¹¹

The terms of reference said the review will be conducted with the following parameters in place:

- The Government has a total commitment to the independent UK nuclear deterrent. The SDR will consider the efficiency and effectiveness of the nuclear programme.
- NATO will remain the cornerstone of UK Defence. The SDR will look at enhancing the UK’s contribution to the Alliance and sustaining a “NATO first” defence policy, while protecting vital UK sovereign requirements and strategic reach.
- The first duty of Government is to keep the country safe and protect its citizens. The SDR will examine the Defence capabilities and options to reinforce UK homeland security.
- The United Kingdom’s support for Ukraine is steadfast and will endure for as long as it takes for Ukraine to succeed. The SDR will consider ways in which this support can be maintained in the short, medium and long term.
- All Defence personnel – in and out of uniform – are at the heart of Defence’s plans.
- The SDR will identify ways to maintain the UK’s defence ties to the Indo Pacific region, the Gulf and the Middle East. The UK is committed to the delivery of the AUKUS partnership with the US and Australia.
- Within these parameters, the Review will consider the need for prioritisation of objectives, and therefore investments and activity, to set out a deliverable and affordable plan for Defence.

¹⁰⁹ Ministry of Defence, [Strategic defence review 2024-25: Terms of reference](#), 17 July 2024

¹¹⁰ Ministry of Defence, [Strategic defence review 2024-25: Terms of reference](#), 17 July 2024

¹¹¹ Ministry of Defence, [Strategic defence review 2024-25: Terms of reference](#), 17 July 2024

- As set out in the Labour Party’s Manifesto, the Government “will set out the path to spending 2.5 per cent of GDP on defence.” This will be dealt with at a future fiscal event.¹¹²

John Healey, the Defence Secretary, opened the [debate on foreign affairs and defence](#) in the House of Commons on 18 July 2024. The Prime Minister also discussed current threats in his [statement on NATO and European Political Community meetings](#) on 22 July 2024.

14.4 A ‘NATO-first’ policy

The government said the review will ensure “a ‘NATO-first’ policy is at the heart of Britain’s defence plans”.¹¹³

14.5 Size of the armed forces

Responding to a question from Ed Davey, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said that the “low numbers of troops” will be looked at in the strategic defence review.¹¹⁴

14.6 Timescale

The [terms of reference](#) state the reviewers will make their final report, with recommendations, in the first half of 2025. It then stated: “the Secretary of State for Defence will subsequently report the SDR to Parliament.”

Current government departmental spending plans, set at the 2021 comprehensive spending review, run only to the end of 2024/25. Plans for 2025/26 onwards will be made at the next Spending Review and must be in place before the end of the 2024/25 financial year.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ministry of Defence, [Strategic defence review 2024-25: Terms of reference](#), 17 July 2024

¹¹³ Ministry of Defence, [New era for defence: government launches root and branch review of UK Armed Forces](#), 16 July 2024

¹¹⁴ [HC Deb 22 July 2024 c373](#)

¹¹⁵ Commons Library briefing, [Spring Budget 2024: A summary](#), 7 March 2024

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