



A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews

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This note is a short guide to the main recommendations of the defence reviews that have taken place since the end of the Second World War, and whether those recommendations subsequently lived up to events.

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1 Background

Despite what one may expect, there have been only eight defence reviews since 1945, up to and including the Defence White Paper in 2003/2004. In the interim periods the general approach of successive Governments has 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*, although 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 Labour Government a Defence White Paper,¹ akin to the SDE, was published the first year after the Strategic Defence Review but that practice was discontinued shortly after.

Given that the SDE were largely statements of policy and an evaluation of the activities of the Armed Forces over the year, the following information only examines the main defence reviews that have taken place since 1945 and involved the fundamental restructuring of the Armed Forces or a shift in strategic thinking by the Government. Copies of the aforementioned reports are available internally via [House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online](#) or in hard copy in the Members Library.

¹ *The Defence White Paper 1999*, Cm 4446, December 1999

For reference, it is also worth noting that since 1946 successive governments have published the outcome of four 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 final review was in 1984 (Cm 9315).

2 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".² 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.

3 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

² Andrew Dorman, "crises and reviews in British Defence Policy" in Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, Pearson Education, 2001

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.³

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 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".⁴

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".⁵ 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.⁶

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,

³ *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, Cm 124, April 1957

⁴ *Ibid*, para 8-9

⁵ Defence Select Committee, *The Strategic Defence Review*, HC 138-I, Session 1997-1998

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

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 defeat at Suez, the government still wanted to maintain the world role and the review focused on the implementation of existing policy.⁷

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.

4 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 overstretched 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.⁸

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

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1965*, Cm 2592, February 1965

deployed in Germany, Cyprus and Malta, withdrawal from Aden, and accelerated withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia and the Persian Gulf. The review also included a commitment to “not undertake major operations of war except in co-operation with allies”.⁹ 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”.

5 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.¹⁰

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,¹¹ a commitment founded on the assumption that the UK’s defence budget should move towards the NATO average¹² 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”.¹³

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 overstretching our forces; and the general purpose forces should be

⁹ *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1966: Part I The Defence Review*, Cm 2901, February 1966

¹⁰ *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975*, Cm 5976, March 1975

¹¹ Defence Select Committee, *The Strategic Defence Review*, HC 138-I, Session 1997-1998

¹² At the time, for example, French defence spending was 3.8% of GDP and the Federal Republic of Germany was 4.1% of GDP.

¹³ *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975*, Cm 5976, March 1975

maintained as insurance against the unforeseen.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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

6 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".¹⁶ 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 review¹⁷ 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

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Second Report from the Expenditure Committee, *The Defence Review Proposals*, HC 259, Session 1974-75, para 139

¹⁶ Malcolm Chalmers, *Paying for defence: Military Spending and British Decline*, Pluto Press, 1985

¹⁷ *The United Kingdom Defence Programme: The Way Forward*, Cm 8288, 1981

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.¹⁸

Such assumptions were of 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 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.¹⁹

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 in to 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.²⁰

7 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:

¹⁸ Defence Select Committee, *The Strategic Defence Review*, HC 138-I, Session 1997-1998

¹⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *The Politics of British Defence 1979-1998*, Macmillan Press, 1999, p.83

²⁰ *The Falklands Campaign, The Lessons*, Cm 8758, December 1982, para 313

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.²¹

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.²² 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.²³

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 and housed as well as motivated. They will need to be flexible and mobile and able to contribute to NATO and, if necessary, elsewhere".²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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

²¹ HC Deb 25 July 1990, c470-1

²² "Options for change: the UK defence review, 1990-91", *International Security Information Service*, No.21, June 1991

²³ Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, 2001

²⁴ Defence Select Committee, *The Strategic Defence Review*, HC 138-I, Session 1997-1998

²⁵ 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

²⁶ The British Army of the Rhine was cut from three static divisions to two, with one based in the UK in peacetime

assessed.²⁷ 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 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.²⁸

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.²⁹

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".³⁰

8 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.³¹

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),³² and thirdly that, as future

²⁷ Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden and General Sir David Ramsbotham, "About face – the British Armed Forces which way to turn?", *RUSI Journal*, May 2004

²⁸ Defence Select Committee, *Options for Change: The Royal Navy*, HC 266, para 40-41

²⁹ Defence Select Committee, *Britain's Army for the 90s*, HC 306, para 56

³⁰ Stuart Croft, *British Security Policy: The Thatcher Years and the End of the Cold War*, Harper Collins, 1991

³¹ Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, 2001

³² 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

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.³³

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵

9 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

³³ Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden and General Sir David Ramsbotham, "About face – the British Armed Forces which way to turn?", *RUSI Journal*, May 2004

³⁴ A further breakdown of manpower reductions is available on p.39 of *Front Line First: The Defence Costs Study*, 1994

³⁵ Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, 2001

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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"³⁸ many analysts considered the SDR to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.³⁹ 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 Research Paper RP98/91 *The Strategic Defence Review White Paper*, 15 October 1998.

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ The post-SDR structure of the Army is available online at: http://www.mod.uk/issues/sdr/post_sdr.htm

³⁸ George Robertson writing in *The House Magazine*, 27 July 1998

9.1 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.⁴⁰

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.

10 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.

³⁹ “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.

⁴⁰ HC Deb 17 October 2002, c500

Therefore, the Defence Mission and Military Tasks as outlined in the SDR⁴¹ were streamlined in the White Paper to comprise a single Defence Aim and 18 Military Tasks⁴² 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.⁴³

Multiple, concurrent small to medium-scale operations⁴⁴ 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.

⁴¹ Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review: Supporting Essays*, July 1998, Essay 6

⁴² Ministry of Defence, *Delivering Security in a Changing World: Supporting Essays*, Cm 6041-II, December 2003, p.4-5

⁴³ *ibid*, p.7

⁴⁴ 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.

- 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.⁴⁵

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 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 Research Paper RP04/71, [The Defence White Paper](#), September 2004.

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.⁴⁶ 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 technology will be cheaper.

⁴⁵ Ministry of Defence, *Delivering Security in a Changing World: Supporting Essays*, Cm 6041-II, December 2003, p.7

⁴⁶ "Britain's future wars may be small but they will certainly not be cheap", *The Times*, 12 December 2003

The most obvious weakness of the White Paper is that the bill has not yet come in – and it is likely to be high.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

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

⁴⁷ "Britain's future wars may be small but they will certainly not be cheap", *The Times*, 12 December 2003

⁴⁸ "UK defence directions", *RUSI Defence Systems*, Summer 2004

⁴⁹ Rear Admiral Richard Cobbold, "Only connections", *RUSI Journal*, August 2004, p.5

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

11 Suggested Reading

The following books and articles provide some useful insight into the question of whether the assumptions made in each of these reviews lived up to subsequent events:

- *The Move to the Sandys White Paper of 1957*, Institute of Contemporary British History, 2002
- Andrew Dorman, "Crises and reviews in British Defence Policy" in Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, Pearson Education, 2001
- Lawrence Freedman, *The Politics of British Defence 1979-1998*, Macmillan Press, 1999, Ch.6 and 7
- Malcolm Chalmers, *Paying for Defence: Military Spending and British Decline*, Pluto Press, 1985, Ch.4 and extracts from Ch.7
- *The Strategic Defence Review: How Strategic? How Much of a review?*, Centre for Defence Studies, 1998
- Extracts from Defence Select Committee report, *The Strategic Defence Review*, HC 138-I, Session 1997-98

⁵⁰ Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden and General Sir David Ramsbotham, "About face – the British Armed Forces which way to turn?", *RUSI Journal*, May 2004