

A Force for Honour?

Military Strategic Options for the United Kingdom

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Future Defence Review Working Papers

This series provides independent analysis and opinion on issues that are likely to feature in a Future Defence Review.

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Issue

What choices must the United Kingdom government make in defining its national military strategy in the forthcoming Defence Review?

Context

Recent operations are widely perceived as evidence that the nation's military strategy has lost its way. There is also an affordability crisis. The government must make some hard strategic choices and the major political parties need to present a clear view of their own intentions for defence in their manifestos for the general election.

Key Findings

- The 1998 Strategic Defence Review was based on ten unstated 'Force for Honour' premises, which must be reviewed at an early stage in the green paper/Defence Review process.
- If defence spending remains at current levels, the hard choice for the UK's military capability will be between two expeditionary options: the 'global guardian' option, which builds on the present demands for counter-insurgency in Afghanistan; or a maritime 'strategic raiding' option which looks to longer-term security challenges.
- If defence spending is reduced considerably, the UK will need to choose a 'contributory' option whereby the UK contributes bits and pieces of capabilities to multinational forces with no significant autonomous or leading role. If the government does not make the hard choice between the first two options, then the third option will become the default outcome, regardless of levels of defence spending, with big penalties for global influence and status.
- Whatever option is taken, inalienable government responsibilities remain, such as the military contribution to domestic security and the protection of dependent territories worldwide.

Analysis

Does the United Kingdom have a Military Strategy?

There is a view that the United Kingdom does not really 'do strategy', in the sense of designing an enduring concept that addresses a route to the longer term. The argument is well made by Sir John Coles, a former permanent under-secretary of state at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.¹ He suggests that the so-called pragmatic British official approach is to create policy devoid of a vision of the future, and that is without any overarching long-term objectives. For British policy-makers, existing policy, such as it is, must form the basis for long-term planning. As this policy is adjusted to meet changing circumstances, long-term plans can be similarly adjusted. If we transfer this model to defence policy planning, the expectation of government would be that the expeditionary capacity defined in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR)² – the toolbox for use overseas as and when government chooses – would be sustained into the foreseeable future, but would be modified to address emerging needs for greater homeland protection, garrison operations abroad, affordability and other factors that may emerge. The pattern of policy white papers since SDR confirms this model.³

It is this author's view, however, that Britain does indeed have a military strategy. This explains how an expeditionary Joint Rapid Reaction Force with its land, naval and air components is intended to make the UK a safer place for its people through operations of choice overseas. This strategy deals with the vision-free future by emphasising reputation, continuity and consistency.

Assumed Premises of the Present Strategy

One can derive a number of fundamental (albeit unverified) propositions from the declaratory policy of the Blair era, which sit comfortably with the continuity of British policy (since at least the Suez crisis of 1956). These are:

1. The UK is a great power and has rebuilt this status economically and militarily since the early 1980s following the post-Second World War decline and retreat from empire
2. The British public presume that their country has this status and will support policy that clearly reinforces it
3. This status is supported by a good reputation for 'value-led' diplomacy which is enhanced and modified by 'the pragmatic approach'
4. As a trading nation, the UK is particularly dependent on a secure world environment because of its geostrategic position, its social associations and responsibilities
5. International influence born of the first two propositions

is the primary way for Britain to make a contribution to a secure world⁴

6. Influence is best achieved through the US which has the dominant capacity for good or bad
7. Influence over the US must be sustained and developed, in major part, through a consistent and reliable contribution of a discrete military capacity which has the strategic significance to be genuinely influential
8. This discrete capability must have operational autonomy if it is to claim strategic significance – UK forces must not be dependent on US capabilities to conduct operations assigned to them
9. This military capacity must be sufficiently large, effective and agile to fulfil roles and missions in a US-led coalition at the theatre level early in an intervention, when the need for the contribution is most urgent and the consequences on policy in shaping a campaign will be most evident⁵
10. Expeditionary capability can always be brought home if the priorities become territorial defence or domestic security.

All ten propositions require serious testing in the forthcoming Defence Review.⁶ They should first be thoroughly examined in the ongoing green paper work. And the political parties have a duty to form their own views, which they should explain and present to the electorate in their manifestos. In particular, the effectiveness of British influence over the US must be questioned after the war in Iraq. Britain's status as an economic great power may not be sustainable through economic downturn. The required military capacity may simply not be affordable. And, Britain's military reputation as the world's most competent stabiliser, if not as a prompt and agile intervener, has certainly been challenged on the evidence of Iraq and Afghanistan.

As analytical devices they do, however, explain the UK's military behaviour since the end of the Cold War, and through the Blair/Brown period to the present. They explain the First Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo and Sierra Leone, as well as Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. They also explain the subsequent embroilments in Iraq and Afghanistan as strategic continuity rather than deviation or decay.

A Force for Honour

Colin Gray has reminded us of Thucydides' primitive motives for using the military instrument – fear, interest and honour – and how these could be the generators for British strategy in the future.⁷ The ten propositions listed earlier can all be derived from these motives and seven of the ten relate to honour. Gray sees honour specifically as reputation. In fact, honour has four aspects, of which military reputation is indeed one that bears heavily on

the ability to influence. The second aspect is moral, as expressed in Robin Cook's 'Force for Good' which might contribute to influence. The third is respect for international order as mandated through treaties and international law. And the fourth is reflexive: in other words, the nation's perception of itself as a world power. For these reasons 'honour' is rather a neat descriptor of Britain's silent military strategic concept. 'A Force for Honour' is probably nearer the mark than 'Force for Good'. We might label these ten propositions the 'Force for Honour Propositions'.

The Expeditionary Motivation

Of course, national territorial defence remains the absolute obligation for governments in so far as they have the capacity to do it alone. But Western nations who are medium-sized or small military powers are likely to continue to take part in military interventions for three broad reasons. First, it remains part of the **strategic bargain** with larger nations who are friends and allies – in particular, the US – to ensure collective security in the widest sense, whether in a NATO context or some other arrangement. This bargain is reminiscent of the Cold War, but it certainly remains a major consideration in relation to Russia for new NATO members. For the UK, the strategic bargain with the US in this European context is no longer at the heart of defence policy. However, the UK's contribution to common defence and security in the context of NATO remains a consideration with a quantitative element. Secondly and thirdly, there are the matters discussed earlier of **world influence** and **moral purpose**.

The bargain with larger nations and influence over them relate to an important additional factor: **inherent** (or existential) **military deterrent capability**. This is the need collectively to maintain sufficient levels of military capability – in particular combat capability – to deter any emerging or existing power in the future from developing or using the military instrument for bullying or blackmail. It is to exclude the use of military power as a cost-effective option. Moreover, one does not need to identify a particular nation – for instance, Russia, China, Iran or some other emergent power – although doing so may be a useful benchmark for military capability.

National Obligations

The government has inalienable obligations which must be addressed in any strategic choice, unless its resources and national will are so compromised that it is in effect a minor power. However, the UK will not have the means to discharge all of these obligations alone. And a guarantee of collective security and defence will require the UK to honour its part in the strategic bargain. These obligations are:

1. Territorial defence

This comprises defence of the UK's territory and of its widely dispersed dependent territories – Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Antarctic Territory, the British Indian Ocean Territory, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falklands Islands and Dependencies, Gibraltar, Montserrat, the Pitcairn Island group, St Helena and Dependencies, the Turks and Caicos Islands – and the two Sovereign Base areas in Cyprus. The UK has the backing of NATO in the defence of the British Isles, but the British Overseas Territories are mainly outside the Treaty area.

2. Evacuation of UK civilians from areas of conflict

This is likely to be a collective task, but the UK's obligation in providing capability and leadership will be in proportion to the number of British civilians involved and the relative size of the nation.

3. State on state conflict

The UK has obligations in conflicts invoking treaty commitments, and the need to deter this possibility as part of a collective.

4. Interrupted access to economic resources

There is a debate as to how critical this access is to national security, in particular sea lines of communication. Clearly any response must be collective but a major power has an obligation to its electorate to contribute and show leadership in proportion to its size and relative dependency on external resources and trade.⁸

5. Domestic security

This includes the military contribution to law and order at home; to preventing and responding to terrorist attack; to preventing illegal immigration, drug trafficking and contraband; and mitigating the consequences of natural disaster beyond the capacity of civil authorities.

Obligations 2 to 4 have a relative aspect involving the degree of contribution to the multinational effort and the level of leadership.

Military Aid to Civil Authorities

Obligations 4 and 5 raise the issue of the roles of armed forces in relation to civil authorities and agents such as blue-light services and coastguard forces. The government clearly has the obligation, but must decide what military contribution is appropriate. In the UK there is an unfinished national debate on this subject. Neither the military nor civil departments are prepared to approach the matter objectively for reasons of resource allocation and culture. It is an important matter for the green paper to tackle head on, for

political parties to form and present a clear view to the electorate, and for subsequent revisions of the National Security Strategy and the forthcoming defence review to resolve.

The proposition that needs to be considered is as follows. The armed forces are a state-owned reserve whose defining feature is combat in the defence of the nation. However it has a range of very useful capabilities, in particular the ability to provide command and control in extreme circumstances where information is poor on an occasional basis. Where these circumstances are rare, it is cost effective not to duplicate these capabilities with civilian capacity. In the case of the UK, there are no constitutional or legal barriers to these cost effective options, and the nation does not own a coastguard force or paramilitary forces for this reason. However, provision for this reserve to be available must be made when choices are made for expeditionary interventions. Although this capacity for aid to civil power and ministries is not a defining feature, it is not a secondary role. Once defined, these become tasks of obligation. Forces on roulement in the UK between expeditionary deployments can to some extent provide this reserve but the demands of training in core skills and preparation for operations mean that these forces alone are unlikely to be adequate.

In the case of maritime security under Obligation 4, it is relevant that the seas outside territorial waters are not, in most aspects, under national jurisdiction⁹ and the military is usually the only law enforcement authority that is available.

Strategic Choices for the UK

There are currently huge economic uncertainties and, indeed, questions as to the longer-term implications of political change in many key powers. The US, Russia, Iran, India, South Africa, Israel, France, Germany, Afghanistan and Japan have all recently gone through electoral processes of which the medium- to long-term outcomes are not certain. However, it is possible to speculate on some broad strategic options for the UK which bear comparison with the options available to the UK in 1997 in advance of the general election and the subsequent SDR.¹⁰

First, it is likely in the short to medium term that the UK will continue with its commitment to stabilisation in Afghanistan. The UK cannot sacrifice its reputation in this respect unless the review and electoral processes have thoroughly considered and dismissed the ten Force for Honour propositions presented earlier. The broad strategic options for the longer-term future are bluntly as follows.

Option 1: The Global Guardian Option

This option focuses more specifically on a continuation of ground operations for robust stabilisation which will provide continuity in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. It will also allow governments to develop and sustain aspirations for global influence through regular and long-term ground commitments, and the ability to act as framework nation for ground operations.¹¹ High-intensity ground combat capability would be retained to provide effective escalation dominance and to contribute to trans-Atlantic inherent deterrent capability. Naval and air forces would have relatively minor supporting roles. This could be characterised as the 'continental' option in the 'continental' *versus* 'maritime' debate of Jonathan Swift¹² and others of the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. It bears mention that the Swift context was essentially European, but Basil Liddell Hart included an expeditionary aspect to the 'continental' option in a lecture at the Royal United Services Institution.¹³ This option allows best for continuity in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, but risks creating a force structure that is not well prepared for other uncertainties, and the prospect of a medium and long term in which there is a general political aversion to commitments to enduring ground occupation.

Option 2: The Strategic Raiding¹⁴ Option

This 'maritime' option recognises that there is unlikely to be the political will in government or in the electorate for further embroilment in operations such as Iraq and Afghanistan in the foreseeable future. It limits this capacity for ground campaigns and refocuses on short-term operations using agile specialist ground forces. It emphasises sea basing and very early presence and inducement operations. High-intensity ground combat capability is retained, but is very specialised strategically. Special forces, and agile infantry such as the Parachute Regiment, Royal Marines and other air mobile formations, would be supported by light- to medium-weight armour with a view to developing ground forces more widely as specialist forces but with a ceiling on numbers in favour of quality. The premise is that a small (relative to other Western nations of similar size) elite ground forces would limit government choices very specifically to short-term early interventions, which would be influential in shaping the pattern of subsequent operations. The UK would make a substantial contribution to maritime security, which would permit a degree of international leadership in this respect. The UK's contribution to trans-Atlantic and European security and inherent deterrence should focus on proactive and maritime capability. This option specifically provides for preventive, precautionary and pre-emptive deployments to contribute to shaping the security environment proactively. The problem with this option is that it is unlikely to be fully achievable while priorities remain in Afghanistan.

Option 3: The Contributory Option

A selection would be made from the present capabilities of the UK's armed forces in order to specifically contribute to the needs identified in an international context, such as the bilateral US-UK relationship, the European context (whether within a NATO or European Union force planning construct), or some other multinational context. This option would sacrifice any possibility for national autonomy for intervention operations, because the UK would be dependent on other nations for all the capabilities that it had surrendered.

Option 4: The Gendarmerie Option

This option accepts that aspirations to be a major expeditionary power are unaffordable and focuses ground forces on contributing to stabilisation options as the offer – albeit a weak offer – in a strategic bargain without the aspiration to retain framework nation capacity or significant high-intensity combat capability. This option could also include some constabulary naval capability to contribute to maritime security.

Option 5: The 'Little Britain' Option

This option focuses specifically on defence and internal security of the British islands, its air space and territorial seas offering such capacity as is available as a contribution to overseas operations if and when the home situation permits. This option abandons any strategic bargain. There is also the question of the UK's Dependent Territories around the world to which there is a legal obligation for defence and security. A government taking this option would have concluded that these responsibilities are unaffordable and would need to relinquish them and transfer them formally to some other authority or, alternatively, insist that these territories assume their own independence in this respect regardless of capacity and consequences.

Some Implications

Clearly, Options 1 and 2 reflect the present debate and imply sustainment of comparable levels of defence funding to the present, but a rationalisation of capabilities. One could speculate that a small reduction of the defence budget might allow a degree of strategic specialisation under one of these options that could be compatible with world power status. However, Options 3, 4 and 5 would allow significant reductions in defence funding. Options 1 and 2 imply retention of specific high-intensity combat capability and therefore, inter alia, the ability to take part in and provide conventional deterrent capability against major inter-state war. Under Option 3, the UK could develop a high-quality specialism in some niche capability areas which would confirm it as a military partner of choice and with some concomitant international

influence. Options 4 and 5 rely on the relative security of an island nation in a benign geo-strategic situation – although economically vulnerable to world events. These latter options also imply a relinquishment of aspirations to sustain global influence.

Let us return to the Force for Honour propositions. Britain is clearly at a watershed. If these ten propositions are judged to be valid and have the necessary democratic support, government must make an early choice between Options 1 and 2 as the direction for the future. A proper commitment to both is unaffordable.

Option 1 allows capabilities to be developed with continuity from the present operational commitment to Afghanistan to the longer term. It also will also sustain the martial reputation of the country, assuming things do not go badly there. However, it would reduce strategic versatility in a future in which government and the electorate will be wary of long-term embroilment in land campaigns.

Option 2 will provide this versatility and greater autonomy (with respect to proposition 8). It may also be better suited to meeting national obligations to Dependent Territories, evacuation of nationals, and maintaining sea access. However, the route from Afghanistan to Option 2 is beset with the risk of compromise. If the nuclear deterrent is vital to national honour, retention is compatible with Options 1 and 2. It is also a contribution to deterrence and the strategic bargain and should be evaluated accordingly. And there is the autonomy question. In any event, the Trident replacement issue is a key element of sound strategic analysis and *cannot* be dissociated from the Defence Review process. These strategic implications and others will be addressed in detail in a forthcoming Defence Review Working Paper.

Conclusions

Of course, a worsening global economic situation and, in the longer term, the implications of climate change, could bring serious security challenges which would require military responses and which would raise the priority of defence in government spending.

All major political parties have confirmed that they will conduct a defence review after the general election in 2010. The strategic choices that must be made in such a review must follow from an evaluation of the ten Force for Honour Propositions that, one can adduce, were unstated premises for the 1998 Strategic Defence Review. These propositions relate reputation, national self-perception, international influence, the relationship with the United States, national autonomy and moral purpose to the national interest and obligations of government.

The expeditionary strategy set out in SDR required a force structure that is unaffordable. If the UK's defence budget is sustained at present levels or cut modestly, two options remain for robust expeditionary capability: a continental option or a maritime one. Only the maritime option will preserve vestiges of full national autonomy to serve purely national military obligations and interests abroad.

There is the strong possibility that some compromise between the hard continental and maritime expeditionary choices will result in a contributory option that neither meets the robustness criteria of the tough options nor the financial economies that a rationally bargained contributory option would achieve.

The implications of making the hard choice between these options, or indeed the consequences of feeble compromise are considerable, and will be examined in a forthcoming Defence Review Working Paper.

Severe cuts in the budget would require a shift from contributing specific robust capabilities to an alliance force structure, to providing no more than constabulary capabilities to interventions, to withdrawing from interventions almost completely. These options must be evaluated against affordability and the fundamental assumptions of UK defence and security, such as the Force for Honour propositions.

The 'Force for Good' was already doomed. A 'Force for Honour' may still have mileage, but will require the rebuilding of broad political consensus, strong and conscious electoral support and levels of funding that are at the top end of expectations in the current recession. 🌐

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Notes

1 John Coles, *Making Foreign Policy: A Certain Idea of Britain* (London: John Murray, 2000).

2 Ministry of Defence (MoD), *The Strategic Defence Review*, Command 3999 (London: TSO, 1998).

3 MoD, *The Strategic Defence Review: a New Chapter*, Command 5566 (London: TSO, 2002); MoD, *Delivering Security in a Changing World: Defence White Paper*, Command 6041 (London: TSO, 2003); MoD, *Delivering Security in a Changing World: Future Capabilities*, Command 6269 (London: TSO, 2004).

4 Malcolm Chalmers, 'A Force for Influence?: Making British Defence Effective', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 153, No. 6, December 2008).

5 Michael Codner, 'The Strategic Defence Review: How Much? How Far? How Joint is Enough?', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 143, No. 4, August 1998).

6 See Michael Clarke, 'The Overdue Defence Review: Old Questions, New Answers', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 153, No.6, December 2008).

7 Colin Gray, 'Britain's National Security: Compulsion and Discretion', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 153, No. 6, December 2008).

8 The present Secretary of State for Defence (SofS) maintains that 'it is right that our Armed Forces act to protect international trade routes'. Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth MP, 'Fitting Defence for the Future: towards the next Strategic Defence Review', Speech delivered at King's College, London, 15 September 2009, <<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/People/Speeches/>>

9 Nations have some rights and responsibilities for their Exclusive Economic Zones under international law.

10 Michael Codner, 'Make do or Mend? What the British Electorate Ought to be Asking About the Defence of Their Realm', *RUSI Newsbrief* (Vol. 17 No 4, April 199); Michael Codner, 'The United Kingdom's Strategic Defence Review: Strategic Options', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 142, No. 4, August 1997).

11 The Defence section of the recently published IPPR Report on the UK's security policy reinforces this focus on land stabilisation options. See Institute of Public Policy Research, *Shared Responsibilities: A National Security Strategy for the UK: the Final Report of the IPPR Commission on National Security in the 21st Century* (London: IPPR, 2009).

12 Jonathan Swift, *On the Conduct of the Allies*, E700001-019 (Cork, Ireland: Corpus of Electronic Texts, 2008), <<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E700001-019/index.html>>.

13 Basil Liddell Hart, 'Economic Pressure or Continental Victories', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 76 No. 50, 1931).

14 Gwyn Prins uses the expression 'strategic raiding' in a specific sense 'the swift, surprising use of force, implicitly on the ground – against the strategic centre of the new-old insurgent threat'. See Gwyn Prins, *The Heart of War: on power, conflict and obligation in the twenty-first century* (London: Routledge, 2002). However its provenance is in the distant past and in this paper means 'raiding to achieve strategic effect in response to diverse threats' where 'raid' is used literally to mean a 'sudden attack made by (a) military party, ship(s) or aircraft' (Oxford English Dictionary).

15 SofS has endorsed the need for the UK to have global influence in the future to shape more effective international institutions and their actions. See Ainsworth, *ibid.*

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