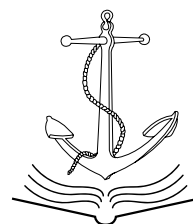


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Back to Basics: British Strategy after Afghanistan

Geoff Till



KING'S
College
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University of London

Back to Basics

British Strategy after Afghanistan

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Key Points

- Defence policy should be strategy-led.
- Afghanistan should be the exception not the rule for British strategy-making.
- British strategy should be based on more hard-nosed economically-based conceptions of national interest.
- Although there is a strongly maritime dimension to those interests, securing them will require a balanced and integrated contribution by each of the three services and most Government departments.

Professor Geoff Till is the former Dean of Academic Studies at the Joint Services Command and Staff College; he is currently Director of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies within the Defence Studies Department. Before that he was Professor of History at The Royal Naval College Greenwich. He has taught at the Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, in the Department of War Studies, King's College London, Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore and the Victoria University of Wellington. He is the author of numerous books including *Seapower: A Guide for the 21st Century*, *The Development of British Naval Thinking* and *Maritime Strategy and the Nuclear Age*. An earlier version of this paper appeared in Mike Codner and Michael Clarke(eds) 'A Question of Security: The British Defence Review in an Age of Austerity' (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

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Back to Basics:

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Introduction

The financial crisis means that the British now clearly face a period of austerity in the realm of defence. What is at stake is Britain's perception of itself and its role in the world – and of course the country's capacity to sustain for the long-term the resources both human and material that its chosen role will require. A number of issues need to be looked at.

The Implications of Afghanistan

Through the SDSR process, it was generally agreed that Afghanistan had to be the main effort for the time being. Being seen to lose this war would undermine British and western credibility for years to come. Now that NATO is committed, the Western alliance cannot be seen simply to cut and run. Most concluded that preserving our relationship with the United States means that Britain in particular needs to 'stick it out' until conditions warrant a withdrawal, or at least a draw down, in a timetable more or less consistent with the American one, although it would seem clear that Obama administration is keen on accelerating the process of withdrawal as much as is decently possible.¹ But even when we assume that the outcome is to be acceptably successful, there are many outstanding lessons to be learned.

The first is obvious. This is not the sort of war we should be fighting, because it suits the bad guys, not us. Partly of course, this is a matter of geography.

Afghanistan is a land-locked country, with a primitive infrastructure, complex social characteristics, a traditional aversion to central government and porous border regions abutting outside areas supportive of the insurgency. As Major General Jeff Mason recently remarked:

You couldn't select a worse place to fight as a logistician. Land-locked, significantly far from a port, a country (with facilities) not even the third world regards as infrastructure ...overall distance and the environment really affect what we do there.²

Resourceful adversaries have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to make the most of the Coalition's unavoidable logistic vulnerabilities, not least the land transit through Pakistan.³

This is aggravated by our own essential characteristics – a free media (easily sceptical of success, able to report every mistake and every failure), the law (which in Afghanistan constrains the lawful much more than the unlawful⁴), the western aversion to casualties,⁵ limited supplies of really committed manpower and 24 hour democratic horizons which militate against sustainable long-term strategies. These all necessarily disadvantage us, and limit our capacity to get what we want. The fact that the Coalition is precisely that - a coalition - multiplies the possibility of less than perfect coordination. Worst of all, arguably, in Afghanistan UN and NATO forces are, for all their dedication and professionalism, labouring under the enormous disadvantage of their association with a regime seen as illegitimate by a disappointingly large proportion of the local population.

Good strategy is about making the best use of one's advantages, and denying the adversary the ability to do the same. In a counter-insurgency situation, this is extremely difficult. Worse, our presence can often seem to be counter-productive, more part of the problem than the solution, especially when, to the locals, our presence seems to take the form of inaccurate air-strikes based on faulty intelligence which kill or injure innocent civilians. The longer garrisoning

forces stay in such places, the worse this gets, unless a very long, perceptive, people-centred counter-insurgency strategy is implemented.⁶

Of course, to paraphrase one of Britain's former soldiers, Field Marshal Robertson, confronting an equally unpalatable series of options in 1916, sometimes we fight wars in the ways we have to, rather than we would wish to. We don't have the options to fight just the wars and in the ways we like. True enough, but since to fight that way is to cede the initiative to circumstances and/or to the adversary, it is hardly an ideal way in which to start the war, and still less to proceed with it. Much better, in fact, would be to prevent these kinds of situations rather than to try to rectify them afterwards. Having to engage in them, in short, is a confession of failure.

Secondly, counter-insurgency is expensive in both human and financial terms. The UK's recent Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40, *Security and Stabilisation: the Military Contribution* talks of a need for 20-25 military personnel per thousand of the population.⁷ In 2009 the operational costs (partly funded from our hard pressed national reserve) were £3.7 billion - the equivalent of just over 10 per cent of the Defence Budget. The former Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth suggested that Afghanistan costs for 2011 would be even more - in the region of £5 billion.⁸ To this, must be added the opportunity costs for defence - that is what we are not spending our money on, but otherwise could be.

It is extremely difficult to assess whether these costs are either bearable or ultimately productive, because this calculation is related to our capacity to meet the financial and human costs of intervention and on the extent of the threat to what we value - and this means, in effect, trying to assess the potential costs of *not* intervening. At the moment given the impact of the recession defining what is 'affordable' both in terms of what we do and what we do not do, this becomes even more difficult than usual.⁹

It is also difficult to prove beyond the doubt of sceptics that this expenditure of blood and treasure is not just affordable, but cost-effective in terms of

reducing the threat of a thoroughly globalised terrorism. Even if Afghanistan 'works,' will not the dispossessed terrorists take up residence and build their training camps in Pakistan's tribal badlands, or the Yemen, Somalia, northern Nigeria and so on?¹⁰ Worse still, sceptics argue, much of the terrorist threat to the UK in fact appears to be home-grown, and may in fact be exacerbated rather than ameliorated by our counter-terrorism activities abroad.¹¹

Doug Badow, Senior Fellow at Washington's right-wing Cato Institute makes the pragmatic if brutal point:

With Al-Qaeda dispersed, Afghanistan, though a human tragedy, does not matter much to America or its allies...Going into Afghanistan was necessary initially, but staying there today is not.¹²

The fact that one can reasonably ask these questions reinforces the critical dangers of what the Americans call 'presentism' - that is assuming that the shape and nature of the campaign you are in represents the shape and nature of all future campaigns against which you should be preparing. In fact one thing we can be sure of, politically, is that we will not get involved in another Afghanistan for the foreseeable future - or anything like it. If the past is anything to go by, tomorrow's main effort will be very different from what we are doing today. Britain and the other contestants need to learn the lessons of Afghanistan - and move on.

The unexpected arrival of the entirely different challenges of the Libya operation exemplified the strategic myopia of SDSR and has reinforced the perceived need for sea-air forces capable of limited intervention in situations ashore in situations where a large ground presence is universally recognised to be highly undesirable. The extreme difficulty that the French and British have faced in speedily resolving the situation without extensive and reluctant US help suggests that their draw-down in sea-air forces has already gone much too far - or that we should abandon our aspirations to engage in interventions of these or any other sort.

Aims and Objectives after Afghanistan

Protecting our trading interests

For us the bottom line (an appropriately economic phrase) is about defending our trading interests; for Britain is, and has been for the past several hundred years, primarily a trading nation. We are heavily engaged in the processes of globalisation. After New York, London is the second most globalised capital in the world.¹³ Ten per cent of our GDP derives from our international financial services; 60 to 70 per cent of the profits of UK listed companies are actually earned overseas.¹⁴ Nearly one in ten British people live part or all of the year abroad while over four million foreign nationals live in the UK. A very high proportion of our GDP derives from international trade. According to the A.T Kearney/Foreign Policy Globalisation Index, the UK is the 12th most engaged country in the world economy. If one excludes the factors that disproportionately skew the calculations towards countries with a very small population, like Singapore or New Zealand, the UK rises to third position, behind only the United States and Canada.¹⁵

Inevitably this means that, in the words of the country's National Security Strategy of 2009, 'The UK is and ever has been, a distinctively maritime country.'¹⁶ So used are the British to laments about their declining financial and maritime status, the fact that the British shipping industry is growing rapidly is hardly noticed. After a 20 year decline in UK shipping, a Government-inspired major reformulation of regulations and taxation arrangements have led to a merchant fleet now 170 per cent higher than it was in 2000. The shipping industry employs 40,000 people in the UK directly and another 212,000 indirectly and brings £4.7 billion to the country every year.¹⁷ The sea is at least as important to Britain now as it has ever been.

Whether we like it or not, we are part of a global trading system. What happens in distant parts of the world, sooner or later affects us here, and often to a much greater extent than it does most other countries. The things that threaten the system by endangering trade and the conditions for trade include:

Disorder ashore and at sea, especially in areas that produce crucial commodities, through which critical transportation routes run or which have clear links to British security and/or prosperity.

Inter-state war. The disruptions to the world economy that a US-China conflict over Taiwan would have are unimaginable. The threats of this are currently low, but we need to help keep them so.

Deliberate attack by forces, both state and non-state, hostile to the intentions, values and outcomes of globalisation.

Exposure to these threats isn't a matter of choice for us. It's an iron law of nature. But what *is* a matter of choice, is what we choose to do about it. We could hunker down, withdraw behind our moat, hope for the best and rely on others – the Americans or the Chinese to sort things out. But that isn't in our tradition or our culture, and most analysts think this 'Little Englander' option not worth serious consideration.

Instead we have adopted a policy of, in the famous words, going to the crisis before it comes to us, in the hope of interposing some strategic space (geographic and temporal) between the threat and its impact on us. It has not always worked, but that has been the aspiration. Stripped of ideological, moral and philosophical razzamatazz, this is a policy of defending trade and the conditions for trade, wherever this needs a military response, and wherever we think we can have suitable effect at bearable cost. This does not mean that we should always go to the crisis; financial austerity means that we can, and should, only do so when our interests are directly affected, which all too often, they will be.

Preventing Conflicts, not just fighting them

Given the difficulties of identifying the bearable costs of kinetic intervention noted above, it is worth making the point that one thing we can be sure of is

that preventing conflicts is much cheaper and much better than winning them when they happen and then engaging in long-term repair work afterwards.

This suggests that a proactive rather than reactive national policy or conflict prevention and deterrence is and should remain at the heart of our national efforts to defend the system from which we derive so much benefit, at least to the extent that our resources allow. Deterrence is about preventing the malign from doing things we don't want them to do and compelling them to do things we do want them to do. We deter either by denial (that is showing them that they won't succeed) or by punishment (that is showing them that the costs outweigh the potential rewards).

The centre-piece of this is nuclear deterrence. A nuclear attack anywhere (but particularly on us) is surely the very worst thing that could assail the system and our place in it. Such an attack might come from a terrorist organisation, or from a hostile state. The potential risks are growing. The nuclearisation of North Korea and Iran seem likely to spark the arrival of a third, or is it fourth, generation of nuclear weapon states, most particularly in the Middle East. This prospect has in turn sparked a renewal of the campaign to get rid of nuclear weapons altogether. It is hard to assess the likely outcome of these two countervailing pressures.

That being so, there seems little appetite in either of the two main parties for the UK to adopt the stance of unilateral nuclear disarmament because a nuclear deterrent is seen to offer protection through retaliatory punishment at least against a state-based threat - though what it offers against a terrorist threat that is not geographically fixed is less clear.

Nonetheless, given the consequent need for a Trident replacement of some sort, various 'Trident-Lite' options have been suggested rather than a like-for-like replacement. These include possible reductions in submarine, warhead and/or missile numbers and more radical proposals that we drop the 'continuous' part of our continuous-at-sea deterrent. Whether these reductions would have much influence on Saudi Arabia's reaction to a nuclear Iran, say,

or more locally save us much money, is, however, all open to very serious doubt, and seems to need to be demonstrated to sceptics over and over again.¹⁸

But deterrence also applies more widely - to the deterrence of general and particular inter-state war - another of the greatest threats to the system. It is frequently claimed that inter-state war is increasingly a thing of the past, provided that one ignores little spats like the Falklands campaign, Kosovo, Iraq 2003, Russia's recent operation against Georgia or current tensions around the Korean peninsula.¹⁹ And yet the composition of most of the world's military machines seems to suggest otherwise, since the focus on high-intensity capabilities such as heavy armour, missile defence, air superiority and anti-submarine warfare seems to make most sense when conducted against peer competitors, rather than terrorists and other non-state actors. And in many parts of the world such militaries have particular peer competitors in mind although they might not say so. But there is no tension, no paradox here. It is because countries take the prospect of inter-state war seriously that makes it less likely to happen. This is why being ready to conduct high intensity operations remains the top priority for most of the world's militaries, not least in the Asia-Pacific.

Most would agree that the UK should seek to maintain the appropriate high-intensity capabilities to help deter inter-state war. But there are two problems with this. The first is the inability to prove that this investment in high-intensity capability problem is cost-effective. You cannot prove a negative. The second is that you particularly cannot prove it in advance. The relentless march of technology means we have to prepare today for possible conflicts 20, 30, 40 years ahead and no-one can be expected to predict exactly how what we do today will play out in the long-term future. But in a future world of climate change, gross shortages in energy, food and water and of major changes in the world's military balance, it seems better to be safe than sorry. Or at least as safe against interstate threats as we can be, with the resources available.

High-intensity capabilities provide a bonus on top of their main role. They provide a good deal of the military credibility that underpins political influence. Because in many, but not all, situations short of all-out war such capacities offer higher levels of protection for friendly forces, and precision against unfriendly ones, they reduce the prospect of untoward loss of life; they increase the confidence of statesmen and undermine the confidence of our adversaries.

Conflict prevention can be hard to detach from the concept of deterrence. If we take the 1961 operation to defend Kuwait against Iraq as an example, this highly cost-effective, proactive move to bolster Kuwait's defences prevented war, by deterring Iraq from invading the country. It was far more cost-effective than responding to such an invasion afterwards as we were bound by treaty to do and had to do 30 years later. The force levels sent in were seen as strong enough to do the trick. This is 'prevention' in the sense of preventing a war happening in the first place. But there is also prevention in the sense of stopping a conflict getting worse. Sierra Leone is a perfect and successful example of that; and so was the Indonesian Confrontation of 1963-66.

Finally, there is prevention of the sort aimed at stopping an intractable conflict or its effect spreading geographically. Not hoping to solve the issues that caused the problem so much as containing it so that it does not destabilise wider areas. The 'Tanker War' and western involvement in the Gulf of the 1980s is an example, again successful, of that. The 1991 Gulf War stopped the conflict spreading to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the region, although subsequent efforts to contain Saddam Hussein in the rest of the 1990s were probably rather less successful, though it is hard to know what he might have done if not contained by Western forces. The Balkan operations of the 1990s on the other hand prevented a wider war, and in the end helped resolve the situation.

Iraq 2003-2009 and Afghanistan 2006 and onwards might well be said to fall into the same category but, since these campaigns aimed to overwhelm powerful adversaries and to reconstruct large and difficult areas so that they

would not produce similar problems for everyone else again, they are particularly ambitious examples of the genre. Whether we should count them as a success remains to be seen.²⁰ The current international counter-piracy campaign in the Gulf of Aden, on the other hand could well prove a much more immediately cost-effective, if modest, contribution to international stability, if and when backed up by appropriate actions ashore.

Overall, the track record of conflict prevention operations doesn't seem too bad. As a policy for a country like Britain, it makes as least as much sense now as it has in the past and, given the financial and human costs and risks of not doing so, arguably now more than ever.

What, given these aims do we need to do?

First and foremost, we need to focus our national attention and our national resources on the places that matter, the Gulf (resources), the Far East (trade) and Africa (resources) not on places that sadly don't.²¹ We may think, in our European complacency, that Kishore Mubabani and Martin Jacques are exaggerating their case that the 21st Century will be the century of the Pacific, or more precisely, of China. They probably are, but seismic shifts are nonetheless under way towards a totally unfamiliar, much more multipolar, even non-polar, world in which the strategic dominance of the United States by mid-century can be much less taken for granted by its friends as much as its adversaries. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of all this to us. We should be focused on the consequences of these shifts, unless we are content to be side-lined for the rest of the 21st Century, merely responding to what the new masters of the globe - whoever they are - decide.

Second, for a policy of deterrence and conflict prevention to work properly, we will need a conscious strategy to help us decide where we need to intervene and where we don't, and to prevent us from merely reacting to unfolding events. From this point of view both the thought processes behind the

production of both the general National Security Strategy, the more specific Security and Stabilisation documents and to a disappointingly limited extent the background material to the SDSR itself are for all their limitations definite steps in the right direction.

Third, it means consciously keeping the costs in human and financial terms commensurate with the expected benefits. This is partly a question of limiting liability as much as possible, of avoiding situations where you are sucked into somebody else's problem, and indeed become part of it as in Iraq and Afghanistan. This may well mean consciously accepting that there are some situations that we simply cannot resolve, some things we cannot do militarily and probably shouldn't try. The aim should be to help develop, not democracy *per se*, much as we might like to, but the trading values of good governance, transparency, the rule of law; ideological crusades intended *au fond* to make everywhere function just like Croydon are surely to be avoided, not least as they betray a lack of confidence that our own concepts of liberal democracy will eventually prevail as we always say they will. Caspar Weinberger often used to talk of an exit strategy - not getting so committed that you can't escape even if you want to. The Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns are going to lower the bar on what the media and the public will regard as the bearable costs of intervention for the foreseeable future. The worry is that this might mean a legacy in which we do not undertake lesser operations that we could and should do, because of a widespread fear that everything will go sour if we try.

Fourth, it means operating with allies, and especially the Americans,²² and influencing their behaviour in the ways we want. No one country can solve or even contain the many threats to the system on its own so we have to work together. But on the assumption that we know best (which often actually seems to be true²³) we want to help shape coalition policy, not just execute it. This means having credible military capability, not token forces.²⁴ It means the ability to lead task groups, not just contribute to them. Staying alongside the United States is clearly critical to this strategy. But there's a problem: recovering from the passing strategic myopias of the Bush administration, the

United States as part of its re-appraisal of its defence needs after Afghanistan, is clearly in the business of refocusing its attention and its operational priorities on the Asia-Pacific region in general and on the critical importance of engaging and/or containing China in particular. Despite, or perhaps because of, its burgeoning economic growth, this is an area that is, at the same time, both fraught with strategic tensions and rivalries and comforted by the constant rhetoric of cooperation and institution-building.²⁵ Either way, it's a place to watch.

In the future, with much less of a strategic lead over all possible rivals to play around with, the United States is going to be able to devote fewer resources to other parts of the world than it would wish. This raises the issue of whether we should help 'back-fill' the gaps left around the world, or be out there contributing our mite to the unfolding of events in the Asia-Pacific. Either way, Washington will need and indeed demand more political and military commitment from us in return for the continuation of its security guarantee for Europe, most recently as expressed by its planned maritime BMD shield in the Mediterranean. And nowhere is the argument for such European support stronger than in the naval and air dimension of conflict because that is where the United States superiority in the maritime Asia-Pacific is facing its greatest challenge. Coincidentally, there does appear to be a slow awakening on the part of we navel-gazing post-modern Europeans that other distant parts of the world do actually matter to us, and that there is at least a recognition that we should try to do something about it, if only in our own long-term interests. Europe's involvement in Afghanistan, for all its manifold deficiencies, is at least a step in this direction.²⁶

Fifth, it means adopting a proactive rather than a reactive stance. This requires us to be there before things go bad, not respond rapidly once they have. It's a strategy of engagement and presence in areas where we are sure we need to be. We should be part of the scenery in all areas of particular concern helping, in the American phrase, to massage the environment 'in a nice way,' - to influence events, help stop them go bad, monitor what is going on, provide continuous insight and early warning that something more serious

may need to be done²⁷ and to help build local capacities to do what does need to be done. Above all, this requires presence of a non-committing sort. This means recognizing that 'stabilisation' operations which mean, in effect, picking up the pieces after a conflict are, in fact, a recognition of failure.

The Means of Future Strategy

Making Conscious Use of Soft Power

We should make the most of what we have in terms of what Joseph Nye famously called 'soft' power. We are still a major economic, cultural and military player with a surprisingly helpful imperial legacy. As anyone who has seen British football on the screens of countries all around the world, or who reads the T-shirts coming down the street and in the metros of most of the world's cities, and notes the continuing fascination with our Royals, the British brand still has a tremendous, if to us surprising, iconic value. Culturally, they all speak our language, not Mandarin or Cantonese as yet,²⁸ and our University system still attracts students in their thousands from around the world, only a few of which respond by stuffing explosives in their underpants and flying to Detroit.

In many cases such soft power means we would be pushing on an open door; no more so than when it came to mean 'leveraging' rather than neglecting the Commonwealth. This organisation is, after all, about the only example of a situation where our Head of State walks in to a room and all the others stand up.²⁹ The Commonwealth embraces 2 billion people, from tiny Pacific Ocean states to sub-continents. Its 53 countries conduct 20 per cent of world trade and include some of the biggest (India, the UK, Singapore) and some of the smallest economies.

But for all their advantages, the British do not make the most of soft power. The Commonwealth, for example, has a major image problem; paradoxically

the value of this institution is much better appreciated by the potential targets of this kind of focused influence than it is by the British themselves or by our antipodean cousins. It has an image problem in the 'older' still predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries but not in India, Malaysia or in swathes of African where opinion polls consistently record much higher levels of support and interest than applies in the UK. Given its potential, the British neglect of the Commonwealth and the connectedly unfocused nature of our aid programme is heroically short-sighted; it is truly surprising that only now is this perhaps beginning to be appreciated.³⁰

Much of this strategic use of soft power will and should be non-military of course. But a much more coherent, conscious and focused exploitation of tremendous assets such as our Defence Attaches, advisory military training teams, our reputation in the realms of professional military education and training would pay dividends. The recent policy of under-resourcing the attache network and BMATs around the world, not least in Africa and the Far East in order to pay for current operational costs, and significantly under-resourcing the Foreign Office, is myopic in the extreme and looked at in frank bewilderment by those we should and could be influencing. These plus a coherent and national emphasis on capacity-building, disaster-relief and the construction of partnerships should all be part of a policy of a conscious strategy of active engagement. *Security and Stabilisation* indeed extols the direct and indirect benefits of 'Regional Military Presence and Advice'.³¹

The fact that the costs of Afghanistan required the MoD temporarily to withdraw the frigate HMS *Iron Duke* and the disaster-relief fleet replenishment ship *Fort George* from the Caribbean just when the Haitian earthquake showed them to be most needed illustrates the human and political costs of not making use of the obvious advantages of presence - in this case naval.³²

Hard power: Force structure implications

The force structure implications and the capabilities required by all this are many and for the most part both obvious and familiar since they have figured

prominently in Britain's not unsuccessful strategy over the past several hundred years.

First, there would be an emphasis on mobile expeditionary forces rather than large garrisoning ones. Since, the sea remains at once the world's largest manoeuvring space, a major source of reduced vulnerability and also provides the basis for the globalised trading system on which our peace and prosperity depend, it makes sense for these to be 'maritime' in the sense that Sir Julian Corbett (our greatest national strategist) used the term - that is, in relation to the activities of joint forces in circumstances in which the sea is a significant factor. As already pointed out, the Libyan contingency, for which a maritime response is ideally suited, is likely to prove a much better indicator than Afghanistan of the situations to which we are likely to need to respond.

Second, since the future is unknowable, Britain and its allies cannot afford to neglect any security contingency which looks possible. Going overboard for the requirements of future large scale and enduring counter-insurgency missions which any future government will now be extremely reluctant to get dragged into, would seem to make little sense.³³ We need instead a balanced portfolio of forces that can cater for as wide a range of options as the economy can bear, either with existing and planned forces, or with ones that can be quickly re-generated should the need arise. Of course 'what the economy can bear' is a variable feast - or famine as the case may be. £5 billion for two aircraft carriers or £21 billion for a like-for-like Trident replacement is certainly a lot of taxpayer's money - but there again so was £17 billion for the shotgun marriage between Lloyds TSB and HBOS or for the infrastructure of the rail link intended to cut 30 minutes off the train journey between London and Birmingham. What's 'affordable' in fact depends on national priorities. It is more a matter of political than economic choice.

Not coincidentally, the conclusion that the United States has come to in its Quadrennial Defense Review and in its defense Budgets for FY 2010 and

2011 is wholly consistent with all of this.³⁴ Current US thinking argues for a move on from its erstwhile focus on the capacity to sustain two medium scale conflicts at the same time to a wider focus on:

...a much broader range of security challenges on the horizon. They range from the use of sophisticated, new technologies to deny our forces access to the global commons of sea, air, space and cyberspace to the threat posed by non-state groups developing more cunning and destructive means to attack and terrorise.

Some big-ticket, high-intensity items have indeed gone: the USAF's F-22 fighter, the Navy's advanced land-attack cruiser the CGX and the Army's Future Combat System (FCS) but more in consequence of the extraordinarily high cost and dubious rationales behind these systems than of the blandishments of the counter-insurgency-is-the-only-thing-that-matters lobby. In the current budgets, despite the \$159.3 billion devoted to 'overseas contingency operations' most of the big ticket items have survived intact the - F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (\$11 billion), missile defence (\$10 billion), long-range strike programmes (\$4 billion) and a 'realistic sustainable shipbuilding programme' (\$25 billion) is in reasonable excess of recent estimates of what the US Navy needs to build up to its 313 ship fleet. This is all in aid of 'more focus on and investment in a new air-sea battle concept, long-range strike capabilities, space and cyberspace.'³⁵ The Independent Panel on the QDR, puts particular stress on the air-sea dimension of defence and, we Europeans should note, on the Asia-Pacific.

To judge by what is actually being spent in the budget for FY 2011, the heated and over-excited media debate about counter-insurgency has settled down into the sensible compromise area advocated by Mackubin Thomas Owens:

Preparing only for what appears now to be the most likely conflict – the long war option – may very well make conventional war more likely in the future. In addition, the ability of the US to advance its global interests requires that it maintain command of the global commons: sea, air and space. The Long war option is not sustainable without such control. Future warfare is likely to be

hybrid in character, possessing interlocking elements of both conventional and irregular warfare. Under such conditions, strategic flexibility must be the watchword for US military and policy makers.³⁶

This is not to say that just because the Americans do it, that we should too, but at the very least it would be surprising if, when reviewing our defence needs for a future and very uncertain world, we should come to very different conclusions from a country that has been a long-term ally simply because we share similar interests and face similar risks. As Paul Kennedy has wisely said:

...scrapping and obliterating what seems, at present operationally irrelevant would be the height of folly. We simply have no idea what the demands upon us will be in ten years time.³⁷

One possibility we simply cannot afford to forget is the continued threat of inter-state war, partly because this is by far the most serious threat to the peace and prosperity of the planet and to British interests and partly because the fact that most other countries are pursuing the 'exquisite' technology required for the deterrence or conduct of high-intensity inter-state wars means that Britain has to do the same - and it has to do it now, because the historical record shows that warning times of approaching conflict are always shorter, and time taken to reconstitute required but neglected capacities longer, than economists assume and people expect.

Not everything can be afforded of course, and the precise mix of British forces will need to reflect constantly changing expectations of a constantly changing set of futures. Nor should the interests of a British/European defence industry for the rest of the century be forgotten in the calculations. Sustaining the industrial capacities that we will need for the rest of the century is a perfectly legitimate part of a sensible national defence strategy. In the Asia-Pacific region, China, India, Singapore and many others realise that, with the 2007-9 recession, the world has moved on from the fragile certainties of Thatcherite monetarism to accept that the state has a major role to play in the support of

industry, certainly in the defence sector. For us not to follow suit, in the spirit of our own Defence Industrial Strategy, would be short-sighted in the extreme.

Third, current experience suggests that the effects at home and abroad of international terrorism that cannot be deterred seems best contained by a range of intelligence led, precision operations by the Special Forces that have been disproportionately effective in Iraq and Afghanistan³⁸ and long-range airpower in its various sea and land based forms.³⁹ The accent on intelligence-led suggests an expanded effort on the intelligence services both at home and abroad.

Finally and more generally, the situations that give rise to failing states or malign regimes where terrorism can flourish can hopefully be prevented by proactive and comprehensive capacity building by military and non-military forces inside the framework of a globalised trading system that is made to seem fairer and so more sustainable than it appears to many people at the moment.⁴⁰ The comprehensive approach to strategy-making that these days we all adhere to has to make the outcome we wish for and the economic system it depends on more acceptable to others – and indeed to many of us.

Conclusion

It may be objected that there is little that is new in all of this, that it merely marks in many respects a return to Britain's traditional strategy, wherever possible, of offshore balancing and limited engagement for maximum effect.⁴¹ But this should be a recommendation not a criticism. Such a strategy has served Britain well over the past several hundred and despite the occasional exceptions of the past and the obvious novelties and manifold obscurities of the present and the future will probably do so in the future too.

Endnotes

¹ 'Raid on MoD cash to pay for Afghan conflict', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 Dec 2009; Secretary Robert Gates, Department of Defence News Briefing, 1 Feb 2010.

<http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptD=4549>.

² 'Coping with the Unexpected', *Military Logistics International*, July/Aug 2010.

³ 'Pakistani Security Forces stop 100 NATO tankers in tribal areas', 22 July 2010. English Xinhuanet.com; '2 NATO oil tankers torched in Pakistan's Balochistan province', *Xinhua Global Times*, 28 Jun 2010.

⁴ The Security Services are required by this to divert much of their time to preparation for court cases and public enquiries into over such things as rendition flights, black prisons, Guantanamo Bay and the alleged ill-treatment of suspects. Although much of this will probably be shown to be ill-founded in the end, it diverts effort from the apprehension of terrorists and strains relationship with the sister services of the UK's allies, most notably the US.

⁵ 'US troop buildup carries high costs', AFP Staff writers Washington, 25 Nov 2009. Military surveys of military forces show declining morale and increased marital problems amongst returning veterans. One in five lower-ranking soldiers serving in Afghanistan are shown to suffer from acute stress, anxiety or depression. Iraq and Afghanistan have so far cost the US \$768.8 Billion. Movement costs in rugged Afghanistan require 83 litres of fuel per soldier per day, which is not only expensive but an unavoidable source of operational vulnerability. Staff writers AFP Washington. 25 Nov 2009. 'Militants destroy NATO oil tanker in Pakistan: police'.

⁶ Doug Badow, (from Washington's right wing Cato Institute), 'US should resist temptation to stay put in Afghanistan', *The Straits Times*, 4 Jan 2010; 'Afghan sitrep', *Jane's Defence weekly*, 30 Jun 2010. John J. Mearsheimer, 'Afghanistan: No More The Good War', *Newsweek Special Edition*, Jun 2010.

⁷ *Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution*, p.2-15.

⁸ 'UK boosts Afghan spending as committee warns on shortfall', *Jane's Defence weekly*, 31 Mar 2010.

⁹ Defence budget figures simply do not add up, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 Dec 2009.

¹⁰ The internet appears central to the connectivity of 'international terrorism' and reduces the importance of geographic location. Significantly, many of the servers for such sites are located in the UK. 'English sites extend reach of Al-Qaeda', *The Straits Times*, 21 Nov 2009. On the Yemen, 'Terror fight in Yemen: US must keep focus', *The Straits Times*, 6 Jan 2010.

¹¹ British al-Qaeda hub 'is biggest in West', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 Jan 2010; 'two thirds of terrorists in Britain are home-grown', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 Jul 2005.

¹² Doug Badow, 'US should resist temptation to stay put in Afghanistan', *The Straits Times*, 4 Jan 2010.

¹³ 'The Globalization of Cities', *Foreign Policy*, Nov/Dec 2009.

¹⁴ Haether Connon, 'Change in the weather', *The Investor*, issue 66, Summer 2010.

¹⁵ 'The Globalization Index', *Foreign Policy*, Nov/Dec 2007.

¹⁶ *National Security Strategy Update 2009: Security for the Next Generation* (hereafter NSS2009), (TSO: Norwich, March 2009), p.97-9.

¹⁷ 'Making waves; Defence Special' – Newsletter of the Chamber of Shipping, Spring 2009, pp.1-2, 4.

¹⁸ Tim Hare, 'Nuclear Policy at sea: A part-time deterrent will not do!', *RUSI Journal*, December 2009, pp.54-58. The Trident programme has now passed its 'Initial Gate'; the price for Liberal support for this has been the launch of yet another review of alternatives. Extraordinarily, even the notion of a nuclear ALCM option has reportedly reappeared.

¹⁹ John Horgan, 'The End of the Age of War', *Newsweek*, Special Issue, Jun 2010; Greg Mills, 'Between Trident and Tristars?' *RUSI Journal*, June-July 2010. Counter-intuitively, most surveys also show that the level of intra-state conflict is declining too.

²⁰ This partly depends on what we subsequently think our objectives were. What victory means is curiously understudied in the strategic literature. See William C Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Military Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Assessing the level of success clearly depends in large measure on being clear about why we fought the war in the first place.

²¹ This approach to policy will be less hard-nosed than might at first glance appear. Pragmatic issues of self-interest justify humanitarian assistance to a much greater degree than is often realised.

²² A sustainable 'special relationship' between the US and the UK, it is increasingly recognised, will need to be based on hard-nosed calculations of common interest, rather than sentiment; but arguably that is the way it has usually been. 'The special relationship is over, MPs say. Now stop calling us America's poodle', *The Guardian*, 29 Mar 2010.

²³ 'All faith and no planning – the British verdict on US postwar strategy in Iraq', *The Guardian*, 14 Mar 2006.

²⁴ Note the scathing criticism of the tokenism of European efforts in Libya by Robert Gates, 'Gates hits out at Europe over NATO' *The Guardian*, 11 June 2011.

²⁵ Mapping the strategic landscape of the Asia-Pacific Region in the mid to late 21st Century has become a major academic industry, though not one that we Europeans pay as much attention to as we should. One school foresees the prospect of major tensions and potential conflicts (China v the US, Japan, or India or any combination of the three, Taiwan, the Korean peninsula; Japan v Russia or Korea, India v Pakistan, the list goes on). The alternate school argues that a lively awareness of the mistakes we Europeans have made in the past, growing economic success and inter-dependence, and Asian values will produce a harmonious future

in the area. There is almost as much debate as what all this will mean for the rest of the world. For some lively insights into all of this, see Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York, Public Affairs, 2008) and Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, (New York: Penguin, 2009), pp.409-413.

²⁶ Stephan Fruhling and Benjamin Schreer, 'NATO's New Strategic Concept and US Commitments in the Asia-Pacific', *Journal of the RUSI*, Oct 2009, pp.98-103.

²⁷ Daniel Goure and Rebecca Grant, 'US Naval Options for Influencing Iran', *US Naval War College Review*, Vol. 62, Number 4, Autumn 2009, is a useful, if particular, application of such thinking. The article emphasises the value of naval forces for such operations but makes the point that 'It is important that the U.S. government articulate the general strategy and purpose behind its long-term force deployment plans. Also, the United States should make explicit the kinds of conditions that would alter those plans', p.19.

²⁸ Martin Jacques, *op. cit.*

²⁹ 'Najib: Move away from business-as-usual mode', *New Straits Times*, (Kuala Lumpur), 28 Nov 2009. 'The Commonwealth Dilemma' has an image problem and needs a make-over but image problem mainly with the old Commonwealth – Australia, New Zealand – and Britain. One third of those polled in Australia and New Zealand would be sad to leave the organisation, but double that, two thirds in Malaysia and India said the same. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and President Sarkozy and the Danish Prime Minister all thought the 60th anniversary meeting of the Commonwealth worth turning up for.

³⁰ 'Tories to put Commonwealth first and demote China in aid shake up', *The Guardian*, 1 Jan 2010. It is encouraging to note that the Royal Navy's Future Surface Combatant programme is formally being discussed with both Australia and New Zealand. 'UK, Australia begin talks on future ships', *Jane's Defence Review*, 27 Jan 2010, and that the Royal Navy put on a spectacular show at Singapore's IMDEX gathering in April 2009 with the presence of the of the LPD HMS *Bulwark* and the LPH HMS *Ocean*.

³¹ *Security and Stabilisation, op. cit.*, p.2-5.

³² 'Royal Navy flotilla withdrawn to cut costs, weeks before Haiti disaster', *The Times*, 20 Jan 2010. Even a temporary withdrawal of the Royal Navy from the Caribbean was historically momentous. The Italians, however have sought to fill the gap with their 27,000 ton aircraft carrier *Cavour*.

³³ David Blagden, 'Strategic Thinking for the Age of Adversity', *RUSI Journal*, Dec 2009, pp.60.

³⁴ For a challenging review of the range of threats posed to US forces, see Andrew Krepinivich, 'The Pentagon's Wasting Assets: The Eroding Foundations of American Power' *Foreign Affairs*, Jul-Aug 2009.

³⁵ *Ibid*; Robert O Work, *The US Navy: Charting a Course for Tomorrow's Fleet*, (Washington: CSBA, 2008), p.14 argues that meeting this target would cost some \$20 billion dollars a year.

³⁶ Mackubin Thomas Owens, 'Let's Have Flexible Armed Forces: Don't assume the next war will look like the last one', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 Jan 2009.

³⁷ Paul Kennedy, 'History, Politics and Maritime Power', *RUSI Journal*, Jun 2004.

³⁸ 'Special forces unite to destroy Taliban leaders', *Daily Telegraph*, 13 Dec 2009.

³⁹ These will certainly need to include unmanned aerial vehicles, one of the most significant – or the most threatening – aspects of the robotics revolution that so many commentators see unfolding over the next few years. See Peter Singer in his *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, (London: Penguin, 2009).

⁴⁰ Mike Moore, *Saving Globalization: Why Globalization and Democracy are the Best Hope for Progress, Peace and Development*, (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

⁴¹ Colin Gray, 'Britain's national security: Compulsion and Discretion', *RUSI Journal*, Dec 2008, makes the point admirably.

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