

The Defence Review Dilemma: The British Experience

Dr David Jordan



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Abstract

Since the end of the Second World War, British defence reviews have been characterised by successive governments attempting to balance policy ambitions and commitments in a context of the proportion of national Gross Domestic Product spent on defence declining. This paper considers the British experience of Defence Reviews and considers some of the key features which have been a constant within the defence review process. It considers areas of previous defence reviews which may have delivered cost savings but not the levels of capability that were required to match near-term defence commitments, and highlights the challenges that the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy will face if it is to avoid becoming another example of the policy ambitions of British governments not being sufficiently resourced.

Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War, the United Kingdom has seen a dramatic decline in the amount of expenditure on defence. In 1952, a little over 11 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was spent on defence; just over 50 years later the British government found itself under pressure to demonstrate that this proportion had not fallen below 2 per cent.¹ This reduction in expenditure has, understandably, seen comparable reductions in the size of the UK's armed forces, yet the desire of successive British governments to play a significant world role despite a mixture of financial difficulties and a desire to reapportion spending away from defence into other areas of the economy has led to a consistent and uncomfortable imbalance between commitment and resources.

The end of the Cold War saw an eagerness to seize a so-called peace dividend, leading to notable reductions in the size of the British armed forces, but without an obvious decrease in commitments. Containment of the Soviet Union (USSR) was replaced by a series of operational deployments which helped to over-extend the armed services.

Although the UK's political leadership has been able to shed itself of the notions of the late 1940s and early 1950s that the country was still part of the 'Big Three' (the powers which won the Second World War), there has been no diminution of ambition in living up to the UK's billing as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and one of the world's leading economies. Successive governments have been faced with the challenge of attempting to meet policy ambitions with an ever-decreasing level of defence spending.

The latest review of defence, under the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy ('Integrated Review' or 'IR') is yet another effort to balance ambition, commitment and expenditure, seeking to 'define the government's vision for the UK's role in the world over the next decade.'²

This paper examines several features which have been a constant within the UK's defence review process, particularly those pertaining to air and space power. These common features can be summarised as:

1. A tendency to highlight new technologies and capabilities which will permit the UK to fulfil its ambition to act as a major power on the world stage with smaller armed forces;
2. Subsequent realisation that the equipment programme required to achieve these ambitions is, in fact, unaffordable unless significant additional investment is made in defence or the ambitions trimmed yet further;
3. A tendency to release money for the new capabilities by declaring that certain items of equipment are most unlikely to be required in future, or can be disposed early as they no longer fit into the UK's defence posture – only for events to intrude upon these assumptions.

The paper notes several examples where the UK has undertaken significant military operations in the aftermath of a Defence Review where equipment deemed to be unnecessary would have been of significant utility had it still been available.

There is an inevitable tendency towards targeting expensive, 'big ticket' items as a means of reducing expenditure or allowing monies to be released for new programmes, and this leads to scrutiny of air and maritime capabilities given their expense. While investment in land capabilities has suffered from a similar problem, the political realities of the Cold War, requiring a strong British Army presence in Europe and the more recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq – again, dominated by 'boots on the ground' – has often made it difficult to achieve balance between the services. It is also clear that ensuring that the capabilities exist to enable success in the range of possible scenarios in which the British government might wish to intervene raises difficult questions which are either glossed over or ignored.

Overall, the paper concludes that the challenge for the Integrated Review is to attempt to break this cycle by asking searching questions about the level of ambition that the nation is prepared to afford.

Ambition versus Affordability – The Past as Prologue

In many ways, the challenges facing British governments have become more diverse and complex than they were in the days when the strategic conditions of the Cold War brought with them a certain degree of stability.

Although there were numerous small conflicts in which the UK and its allies participated, the basic premise underpinning British defence policy remained constant, with the focus being upon the threat presented by the USSR. Operations in the UK's ever-declining empire, or which emerged as part of a legacy commitment to former colonies, could all be managed by the large forces that the UK maintained, at least initially. The challenge arose when the proportion of the UK's GDP spent on defence became an obvious target for reduction in an era of fiscal pressure, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s when Britain's economy was affected by a series of crises.

It took some time after the Second World War for governments of the UK to accept that the nation could no longer make a legitimate claim to be amongst the first rank of major powers. The cost of fighting the Second World War had diminished Britain's power, and the US and USSR were clearly the two 'superpowers'. Despite straitened fiscal circumstances, Britain could still lay claim to being a significant world power. In terms of air power, British development of the jet engine, and production of the first credible Allied jet fighter, the Gloster Meteor, suggested the potential to remain at the cutting edge of military affairs.³ The challenge for the Attlee government lay in the fact that thanks to innovations in the US, some drawing upon captured German technology, the lead in military aviation was at risk of passing across the Atlantic. The slow development of jet fighters for the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy (RN) contrasted sharply with that in the US. While the RAF was in the process of adopting an updated version of the Meteor, the US Air Force (USAF) was bringing the North American F-86 Sabre into service, a swept-wing fighter which could perhaps lay claim to being the best in the world at the time of introduction.

The debacle of the Suez intervention in 1956 led to the 1957 Defence Review – known as the Sandys review after the Minister of Defence who oversaw it – which placed great emphasis on atomic weapons and technology as the backbone of Britain's future defences, with the ending of compulsory national service and considerable reductions in the front-line strength of the RAF being perhaps the most notable features of the review. Although these moves reduced the amount being spent on defence, commitments remained largely unchanged.

While Sandys' review was designed to reduce defence expenditure, it did not mark a notable decline in the willingness of the British government to involve itself in a range of operations overseas. Although the operations in Cyprus, Malaya and Kenya had all drawn to a conclusion by the end of 1960, the year in which the last conscripts were called into service, the willingness of the UK to play a significant part in the world continued, with the ongoing presence of substantial forces in the Far East, the Persian Gulf, Africa and the Mediterranean. This meant that while the scale of Britain's armed forces had been reduced by Sandys, the scale of ambition had not.

This was in part facilitated by a recovering economy, which had prompted Harold Macmillan to proclaim that the nation had 'never had it so good' and ensured that even a reduced proportion of GDP spent on defence still represented a significant amount of money.⁴ By 1964, the picture was far less happy.

Upon winning the 1964 General Election, Harold Wilson's new administration discovered that the UK was in financial difficulties. The outgoing Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald Maudling, famously looked round the door of his now-former office as he left 11 Downing Street for the final time, and apologised to his successor, James Callaghan, for the mess that he had left him.⁵ Callaghan had inherited a balance of payments crisis and a manifesto which had promised increases in welfare spending. While some economists advocated the devaluation of the Pound against the US dollar in a bid to mitigate or even end the crisis, this was politically impossible for the Labour party; one of the reasons for the party's eviction from office in 1951 had been the negative political implications caused by a previous devaluation of the Pound in 1949. Unwilling to devalue, or to let the Pound float, the government sought – in vain – to manage its way out of the crisis. This required significant and painful cutbacks in public spending, and defence was not exempt.

Ambition Constrained

The result of this approach was to see a major re-evaluation of Britain's defence policy. Aircraft such as the TSR2, P1154 Vertical & Short Take Off and Landing (VSTOL) fighter, and Armstrong Whitworth 680 VSTOL transport were cancelled in favour of American alternatives and the aircraft which would become the Hawker Siddeley Harrier, while the RN's new aircraft carrier, the CVA01, also succumbed to the budgetary 'axe'. The RN was to lose its carrier capability entirely by the early 1970s, with the Buccaneer strike aircraft being transferred to the RAF as the 'new' aircraft to replace the Canberra bombers which had been in service since the early 1950s. More importantly, Britain's overseas presence was to be dramatically reduced. The 'East of Suez' commitment was to be abandoned, and the UK's focus would be placed upon Europe and its commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The abandonment of the East of Suez commitment and continuing economic difficulties duly led to the Wilson government cancelling its order for the General Dynamics F-111, the supposed TSR2 replacement.⁶

These changes were controversial. The obvious reduction in global capability was not well-received in Washington, where the Johnson administration, already smarting at Wilson's refusal to send troops to support the US in Vietnam, felt that Britain was abandoning key areas of the world, a step which would require increased US involvement at a time when the cost of the Vietnam War made further commitments extremely unwelcome.

The recognition that Britain's defence resources could no longer stretch to the sort of commitments which had been extant since 1945 was not accompanied by any reduction in ambition to have global influence. Although the permanent presence in Singapore and Malaysia ended, it was replaced by the Five Powers Defence Arrangements which maintained British interest in the Far East; there was no thought of abandoning Britain's involvement in the Gulf – best exemplified by the small but significant commitment to supporting the Sultan of Oman during the Dhofar War – and the UK's willingness to maintain a presence in the Mediterranean remained, with the bases in Cyprus and Malta being retained.

While ambition remained intact, the need to save money meant that permanent overseas commitments in the form of permanent main operating bases – the bedrock of what was the so-called 'East of Suez' policy – were reduced along with the scale of the armed forces. The parlous financial conditions saw the decision to end the permanent stationing of forces in Singapore, Malaysia, the Maldives and the Persian Gulf, with a clear focus upon operations in Europe. The British Army gained an unexpected commitment from the late 1960s, with the requirement for a military presence in Northern Ireland as the result of 'The Troubles'. Britain's financial position did not improve, and further defence cuts in 1975 saw the UK's defence spending dedicated to deterring and, *in extremis* fighting, the USSR.

The increased focus upon Europe following the decision to withdraw from East of Suez commitments reached a new high point in 1975, with yet another review driven by financial considerations. Known as the Mason Review after Roy Mason, the Secretary of State for Defence, the review saw a further attempt at contraction of the UK's world role in a bid to bring the proportion of GDP spent on defence down to what, in 2021, seems to be an unimaginable high of 4.5 per cent. The air transport fleet, vital to the projection of power around the world, was to be reduced as the UK's focus contracted to western Europe. The Shorts Belfast, the RAF's strategic transport aircraft, was retired and the airframes sold, while the Andover tactical transport used by 38 Group was withdrawn from use, and the number of Hercules transport squadrons reduced, although the overall fleet size remained unchanged. The two squadrons of Bristol Britannias and the De Havilland Comets of 216 Squadron were also retired.

The rationale behind these changes was that such aircraft were not required in an era when the UK's defence focus was upon the NATO area of operations, and the possibility of there being 'out of area' deployments requiring such a large transport force was dismissed or optimistically ignored.

Unfortunately, the UK's defence interests remained far wider than just the European theatre, and the ramifications of the 1975 changes became obvious in 1982 with the response to the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands. The Belfasts, now operated by the Heavy Lift concern, had to be chartered along with other airlift capacity which previously resided within the RAF's order of battle. While it would be an exaggeration to claim that the dramatic reductions to the RAF's air transport force in 1975 had profoundly serious implications in 1982, the cuts did demonstrate the risk of removing capabilities on financial grounds with key factors such as the defence of British Dependent Territories.

The decision to retire HMS *Ark Royal* was brought into stark focus by the Falklands War in 1982. The loss of the capability provided by the *Ark Royal*'s air wing of Phantoms and Buccaneers when compared to the Sea Harriers aboard HMS *Hermes* and HMS *Invincible* was obvious, but it was perhaps the loss of the Airborne Early Warning (AEW) capability provided by the Fairey Gannet AEW3 which was most painfully felt; without AEW, the British Task Force proved to be more vulnerable to Argentine air attack. The removal of CVA01 from the defence programme in 1966 had been accompanied by the optimistic assessment that the UK would not conduct the sorts of operations for which carriers would be required – operations which looked remarkably similar to those carried out in 1982.

New World Order and New Ambition?

The challenge facing British governments remained that, whatever their political allegiance, the long-standing urge to be a significant player on the world stage had not been overcome, and that this demanded a much greater ability to deploy hard power than the defence budget would allow. The 1975 Review paper had complained that the previous Conservative government had placed 'greater emphasis on a willingness to counter threats to stability throughout the world', hinting at the long-standing challenge of matching ambition and resource, but complaints of this sort did nothing to rein in the instinct to use military power, even if the means of doing so relied upon forces which were increasingly configured to fight in the context of a war in Europe.⁷

The lack of certain capabilities in the Falklands conflict remained largely unaddressed in the aftermath of the war. The difficulties in closing an enemy runway had been highlighted by the two Operation Black Buck raids by ageing Vulcan bombers, which, lacking precision munitions or a dedicated anti-runway weapon, had been forced to conduct two raids against the runway at Port Stanley using a 'cross cut' attack method which, it was hoped, would manage to land one or two bombs on the runway per sortie. Operation Black Buck One saw a single bomb land on the runway, while Black Buck Two missed by a matter of yards.⁸ Recognition that a specialised weapon was required had seen the development of the JP233 system for deployment on the Tornado GR1 strike aircraft, but this was clearly intended for use against Warsaw Pact airfields, rather than for employment on global operations countering what the 1975 review had characterised 'threats to stability throughout the world.'⁹ Although a case could be made that the Falklands was not an aberration but merely a continuation of Britain's willingness to use military force outside the NATO area when in the national interest, the main thrust of defence policy remained countering the USSR.

The dramatic changes in the Soviet Union after 1985 under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev saw a swift and unexpected thawing of tensions, the reduction of Soviet influence over Eastern Europe and a greater spirit of cooperation, bringing about a major strategic change which would have seemed almost unimaginable at the start of the 1980s. It forced all NATO nations to consider their future defence posture, with many concluding that a reduction in defence spending and the reallocation of those resources to other areas of government expenditure was desirable. In the case of the United Kingdom, the way in which this adjustment was conducted was perhaps not as optimal as it might have been. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 saw the British government, led by Margaret Thatcher, in the vanguard of nations prepared to commit military forces to the Middle East to deter Saddam Hussein from possible further adventurism and, if diplomacy failed, to evict his troops from Kuwait to restore the government.

While the end of the Cold War presented the British government with the opportunity to contemplate a reduction in defence spending, some of the optimism about a more secure world had been severely shaken. The supposedly more stable world in which expenditure on defence capabilities could be reduced was challenged by Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, suggesting that a peaceable 'New World Order' could not be taken for granted. Despite this, efforts to reduce defence expenditure continued throughout the 1990s, first with the completion of the so-called 'Options for Change' review which was to deliver the 'peace dividend' and then a series of other diminutions in expenditure. This occurred despite a backdrop of a considerable operational tempo, particularly for the RAF which was committed to operations to contain Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the 1991 war and then to other interventions as it quickly became clear that the 1991 Gulf War was not, as some initially averred, an aberration.

It was, in reality, an indication that the relative stability of the Cold War period was to be replaced by a series of crises in which successive British governments felt it necessary to intervene alongside their allies. The decision to become involved in peacekeeping efforts in the Yugoslavian civil war highlighted some of the challenges and led to criticism of John Major's government for failing to resource commitments adequately.

This criticism reached its peak in the run-up to the 1997 General Election, where the Labour opposition, led by Tony Blair, promised a defence review which would overcome the problem. Although cynics muttered that this would make the review unique if it achieved that aspiration, the tone of the criticism from the Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, Dr David Clark, expressed a widely held view of the Major government's approach to defence:

...the Government's defence policy is determined not by a clear set of strategic priorities but rather by the Treasury. Cost, not military necessity, is the prime criterion of Conservative defence policy. The Government has implemented defence cuts which have left Britain's armed forces overstretched and in a state of uncertainty.¹⁰

An Under-resourced 'Force For Good'?

When Labour won the 1997 election a Strategic Defence Review (SDR) was duly undertaken, reflecting Prime Minister Blair's enthusiasm for the concept of liberal humanitarian intervention, with the UK being cast as a 'force for good.' Blair's approach to foreign policy, and thus his vision of Britain's role in the world, was not, on analysis, greatly different from that of previous administrations, placing the UK as a major player in world events.

British forces were thus used on a wide range of tasks. For the early years of the Blair administration, these included the continuation of peace-keeping duties in the former Yugoslavia; intervention in the Sierra Leone civil war; and supporting the no-fly zones over Iraq. There were also operations against Saddam Hussein (Operation Desert Fox, 1998) and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Operation Allied Force, 1999).

The SDR, overseen by the new Defence Secretary, George Robertson, was praised at the time for being balanced and addressing some of the apparent challenges which existed in terms of maintaining Britain's capability to make a meaningful contribution to intervention operations.¹¹ The review delivered a commitment to a new strategic transport aircraft and two new aircraft carriers of significantly greater size than the *Invincible* class ships which had replaced *Ark Royal*. The SDR was meant to provide Britain with the means of enacting expeditionary operations, providing the means through which the Blair vision of intervention could be delivered.

While the SDR was well-received as an analysis of Britain's defence and security issues and its prescriptions to meet the requirements which fell out of this analysis, it suffered from a clear difficulty, in that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, was seemingly unwilling to prioritise defence spending, and the review was never properly funded.¹² The demands upon British forces were only to increase in the aftermath of the terror attacks on the United States in September 2001, with the decisions to support the intervention in Afghanistan against Al Qa'eda and the Taliban government which harboured them, followed by the UK's enormously controversial participation in the Iraq War.

The latter two conflicts imposed a heavy burden upon the armed services, particularly the British Army, but the requisite spending on capabilities to fight two enduring counter-insurgency operations was not matched by increases in defence spending, even if funding increased in real terms. Faced with two wars in which the Army took the leading role, the capabilities of the RN and the RAF began to suffer.

Despite these continuing operations, there was little attempt to match defence resources to actual commitments. The strategic shock of 9/11 led to the decision to write a 'New Chapter' to the SDR which sought to take account of the changed strategic environment, most notably the threat of terrorist attacks and the UK's involvement in the intervention in Afghanistan. As the name 'New Chapter' suggested, this involved a recalibration of approach rather than a fundamental reappraisal of defence policy. Suggestions that a more profound review might be required were overlooked, and accusations that increases in defence spending were inadequate to meet actual commitments grew.

Brown, who succeeded Blair as Prime Minister in 2007, faced accusations that the armed forces, particularly the Army, were not sufficiently resourced for their tasks. Several former senior officers suggested that funding required capabilities through the means of Urgent Operational Requirements (UOR) had become the norm, and while it was true that the Treasury had not rejected any UORs placed before it, the amount of money spent on the armed forces was inadequate to meet the demands placed upon them. It was further alleged that the need to find money for operations from within an inadequate budget had led to a failure to fund infrastructure work on accommodation for service personnel, with a deleterious effect upon both morale and retention.¹³ Brown's administration (June 2007–May 2010) became dogged by the perception that it underfunded the forces, with protestations that the amount spent on defence had increased being countered with the charge that the increases had not been sufficient.¹⁴

To add to the complications facing defence spending, it had become apparent that the future equipment programme was unlikely to be affordable, a position exacerbated by the global financial crisis in 2008. The National Audit Office's (NAO) report on defence major projects in 2009 was accompanied by a press release in which the head of the NAO stated that there was a 'multi-billion pound budgetary black hole' which appeared to be being tackled through what he termed a 'save now, pay later approach.'¹⁵

The 2010 General Election produced a hung parliament, leading to the formation of the first Cameron administration, a coalition between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. The Conservatives had promised a new defence review (criticising Labour for having failed to enact a full-scale review since 1998, despite the changed circumstances of two significant operational deployments along with a clear resurgence in Russian military activity). The financial crisis meant that there was a certain air of inevitability to reductions in defence capability.

The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) was therefore notable for some significant reductions, with the cancellation of the troubled Nimrod MRA4 maritime patrol aircraft and the retirement of the joint RAF/RN Harrier force (and the *de facto* immediate removal of the UK's aircraft carrier capability) being the most significant. It was also notable for the considerable amount of media commentary; the growth in social media and online fora meant that unlike 1998, the defence review could be subjected to extensive commentary from not only the established media, but from a variety of interest groups. Their contributions varied from the thoughtful to the unhelpful with suggestions ranging from the retirement of the RAF's Tornado GR4 fleet and the retention of the Harrier to cancellation of one or both of the new aircraft carriers.¹⁶

The subsequent 2015 review, under the second Cameron administration (now a Conservative majority government) sought to marry national strategy to defence commitments, continuing efforts to deal with a significant 'black hole' in defence spending where it was clear that the equipment programme was unaffordable within the levels of projected spending.

The Challenge For Today

As this paper is written, the UK is in the midst of the Integrated Review, set against the backdrop of the ongoing global Covid-19 pandemic and the as-yet unclear extent of the economic damage this has caused. The Johnson administration's ambitions to create a 'Global Britain' in the aftermath of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, with the implications that the nation's hard power should remain constant (and some early, pre-pandemic hints that an increase in hard power would be appropriate) may well require some difficult decisions to be made about the levels of national ambition in defence and security and how to match resources to fulfil them.

It is quite clear that although public disquiet over the intervention in Iraq remains an issue, distance from the events has, to an extent, reduced the level of disquiet about the UK having an activist approach to foreign policy and military intervention. The actions of the so-called Islamic State (or Da'esh) terrorist group and a profound distaste for the regime of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya ensured that there was at least cautious support for the intervention in Libya in 2011, along with the operations against Da'esh and a continuing, if small, presence in Afghanistan.¹⁷

Ambition: From Big Three to Global Britain

The first challenge facing any review is that of how British governments perceive the United Kingdom's position in the world. There is a very clear theme throughout post-war history of governments, be they Labour, Conservative or coalition, of the UK needing to play a significant role in world affairs, as befitting a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council and one of the G7 group of leading economic powers.¹⁸ The UK's departure from the European Union presents a number of as-yet largely unexplored defence and security challenges and opportunities, but the Johnson administration's ambitions for a 'Global Britain' suggest that retreating from the wider world is not an option.

The government suggests:

Global Britain is about reinvesting in our relationships, championing the rules-based international order and demonstrating that the UK is open, outward-looking and confident on the world stage.¹⁹

This implies that 'hard power' will remain an important tool of the government's approach. The experience of past reviews suggests that there is a risk of difficult questions about the financing of defence and ensuring that the hard power provided by the armed forces is both sufficient to meet demand, and sufficiently flexible to address the range of risks confronting it.

The reduction in Britain's defence capabilities East of Suez provided a clear warning for policy makers about the possible risk to reputation caused by retrenchment. The removal of carrier-based air power and the air force elements in Singapore and Malaysia was a source of much angst to President Johnson's administration, although their concern was heightened by the context of the US's commitment to the Vietnam War. It seems most unlikely that a review seeking to at least maintain the UK's status as a globally significant nation would go so far as the reviews which ended the commitment East of Suez, but there are risks. Siren voices suggesting reductions in combat air power and the removal of carrier air power offer the tempting vision of using cyber and artificial intelligence-based capabilities as a mechanism for influence, and for enhancing combat mass.

Yet the experience of the Sandys review, and, more recently the move towards Network Enabled Capability, first presaged in the New Chapter to SDR, but not yet complete in terms of assuring the sort of networked capability envisaged, suggests that temptations for 'quick wins' by removing extant capabilities to bring new technology into mainstream risk creating gaps which reduce not only capability but potentially credibility in the eyes of partner nations. The removal of the UK's long range maritime patrol capability, first with the early retirement of the Nimrod MR2 and then the cancellation of the Nimrod MRA4 serves as a useful illustration of how a nation's hard power may be perceived to have declined.

While reviews should not seek to be exemplars of defence conservatism verging on luddism, care needs to be taken to avoid falling into the same trap as before. The maintenance of 'seed corn' capability for the RAF's maritime patrol force and increased exchange tours with the United States Navy and US Marine Corps for RAF and RN pilots to create a repository of experience in carrier operations represented a sensible and effective mitigation of the reductions in the 2010 SDSR but could not completely overcome the capability gap which was created.

The implication here is that while the temptation to make reductions to the defence budget by removing capabilities which are thought to be on the verge of obsolescence is obvious, it may not in fact be in the best interests of the UK's defence posture. Yet the attraction of doing so is strong, for reasons Sir John Nott suggests:

We have to keep up with the threat, and keeping up with the threat is horrendously expensive.²⁰

As will be discussed below, the defence review overseen by Nott in 1981 was not only controversial but the source of much criticism because of its focus on reducing the size of the Navy less than a year before the RN was the mainstay of the operation to retake the Falklands. Yet his observation about the cost of maintaining the capabilities expected of a leading power is valid, and illustrates the difficulties facing those conducting defence reviews of ensuring that a sensible balance is maintained.

'We Won't Need That...' Syndrome

Succumbing to the temptation to remove capabilities wholesale, while having financial sense (through removing support chain costs as well as the capability) may be attractive, but tends to rebound, sometimes upon the governments which have implemented the changes. As noted above, the Nott Review is often cited as an example of this occurring.²¹ Nott, charged with dealing with a defence budget which was unaffordable, was compelled to make some most difficult choices in his attempts to address the problem. He was limited as to the range of reductions that he could make as a result of the political context, even though the UK was in the throes of a difficult economic situation.

Wholesale reductions to the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) were simply not a viable option, either in terms of domestic or NATO politics. In opposition, the Conservative Party had been deeply critical of the diminution of the UK's air defences (perhaps overlooking the fact that the decline had been started by the Macmillan administration and the Sandys Review) while the political implications of seeking to reduce the multi-national Tornado combat aircraft programme meant that dramatic reductions here were almost impossible. The clear need for the Tornado in the RAF's front line meant that making cuts to the RAF would not only go against the party manifesto but would have implications for the UK aerospace industry as well as obvious ramifications for the UK's air capabilities and the way these were perceived by NATO allies. Nott was thus compelled to consider deep cuts to the RN, achieved through a reduction in hull numbers. The RN suffered most from the reductions brought about by the review, and this was the source of much criticism, with many acerbic comments to the effect that the Falklands conflict illustrated the folly of making swingeing reductions.²² Nott is rarely given credit, however, for reversing the decision to retire the RN's amphibious capabilities which was made in the 1975 defence review (he had planned to simply bring the retirement date forward to save more money), and is all-too-frequently claimed to have made a decision which was proven wrong in the most embarrassing manner possible.²³

A similar potential embarrassment arose in July 1990. The Options for Change review envisaged a reduction in the strength of BAOR from four divisions to two and the reduction of the RAF's Tornado GR1 force by three squadrons. Less than a month later, it became clear that any operation to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait would require Britain to contribute both heavy armour and a substantial number of Tornado GR1s to make a notable commitment to the coalition forces in the Gulf.

In 2011, the decision to retire the Harrier and the effective removal of aircraft carrier capability as a result of the 2010 SDSR was highlighted by many commentators as illustrating the failure of that review when operations against Colonel Gaddafi began. The lack of the ability to deploy an aircraft carrier with a force of Harriers aboard it was held to be a clear demonstration of the folly of preserving the Tornado GR4 force ahead of the joint Harrier/carrier capability.²⁴ While claims that the Harrier would have been a much better option than Tornado are highly contestable, having the option to employ the Harrier as an additional capability would have been most useful.²⁵ The retirement of the Nimrod R1 Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) gathering aircraft was due to occur a matter of days into Operation Ellamy, and while this was not a result of the 2010 review, the rapid extension of its service illustrated the importance of intelligence-gathering capabilities; the review had called for the retirement of the Sentinel R1 as soon as its support to operations in Afghanistan had ended, but this was overturned as a result of the Libyan operation.²⁶

The Integrated Review and Air and Space Power

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has dominated much of the public policy discourse in 2020, coverage as to the possible direction of the Integrated Review has been sufficient to suggest that a focus upon air and space power will be an important aspect. Previous reviews have not necessarily fared well in this respect. The 1957 Review made considerable reductions in the nation's air power, and it is arguable that the UK's air defences did not fully recover from this. In the 1960s, the requirement for the ability to deliver a long-range conventional strike capability to replace the RAF's Canberra bomber/interdictor force saw the rejection of both the TSR2 and the F-111, while the decision to cancel the planned CVA-01 aircraft carrier adversely affected the ability to project air power from the sea.²⁷ The 1975 review had a deleterious effect upon the RAF air transport force, and various cost-saving measures which concluded in the Nott Review left the RN with two aircraft carriers instead of the intended three. The post-Cold War era saw significant reductions in combat air strength, which has presented continual challenges for the RAF, which has been engaged on deployed operations of various scales since the summer of 1990, with little, if any respite; even when the tempo of operations was such as to suggest that further diminution of front line aircraft strength might be inadvisable, the Tornado GR4 and F3 force were subjected to further rationalisation, while the Jaguar force was retired early, as was the RN's Sea Harrier.

The 2010 SDSR, as well as further reducing the RAF's front-line strength, concluded that the new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers should operate the carrier variant of the Lockheed F-35. While this decision was applauded in a number of online fora at the time, the implications of the change had not been fully thought through, and a reversion to the original plan to utilise the F-35B Short Take Off and Vertical Landing variant (made in 2002) followed in 2012. While this was politically embarrassing, it was not as damaging as some previous review decisions, and the F-35B's progress into front line service in the UK has been apparently smooth. The decision to retain the early-production Tranche 1 Typhoon FGR4s in service has improved the position of UK air power, as has the successful implementation of Project Centurion, which has given the Typhoon an impressive air-ground capability, replacing that of the Tornado GR4. The decision to upgrade the Typhoon with an electronically-scanned radar further adds to the UK's air power capabilities for the future. Although 1990-2010 marked a period of exceptional challenge to the UK's air power capabilities, the position in early 2020 looks promising, particularly in relation to the Tempest aircraft concept. The challenge for the Integrated Review will be to maintain the momentum which has begun to develop in maintaining and enhancing air power capabilities vital to successful operations, which will require a willingness to blend mature technology with that at a nascent stage. This is not a straightforward task, as an array of mis-steps, cuts and misperceptions about air capabilities have demonstrated.

Tackling the Defence Review Dilemma?

There is considerable evidence from past reviews to suggest that the removal of capabilities – whether that be because of perceptions of limited utility in future conflict, or as a means of making savings – without an accompanying realignment and rebalancing of commitments brings a notable level of risk.

This may not be brought into relief as quickly as the perceived flaws in the 1981, 1990 and 2010 reviews were. Decisions made in the 1960s ensured that the Task Force went to the Falkland Islands without airborne early warning cover, while the removal of a significant element of the RAF's transport force in the 1975 review was also problematic in 1982 and potentially beyond.²⁸ Getting this balance correct is exceptionally difficult, and to attempt to do so perhaps requires a mindset which asks what capabilities are required to achieve the UK's national aims in terms of interventions.

This dilemma has been at the heart of all post-war defence reviews. It may be regarded as mildly depressing that there is good cause to suggest that announcement of retiring 'old' capabilities in favour of investment in new technologies has often been done more to create the impression of remaining at the leading edge of military capabilities than to actually invest in the equipment and personnel required to be positioned there.

If the Integrated Review is to fulfil its objectives, the decision-making process becomes even more taxing. Does the government conclude that it must trade extant capabilities which are still useful to allow the procurement of new technologies and capabilities which are likely to play an important part in future conflict, even if this means making some apparently unpalatable decisions (such as reducing the number of Army regiments, or the Navy's ships, or removing whole fleets of aircraft)? Or does it seek to walk a tightrope of investing sufficient monies in allowing the development of new capability areas while ensuring that a credible range of extant capabilities is maintained? And perhaps most significantly of all, is the government able, in a way unlike some of its predecessors, to accept that building and maintaining the range of capabilities necessary to fulfil the nation's perceived national interests, at least in terms of hard power, will require significant expenditure? Or will we see acceptance that a trimming of aspirations and ambitions, so that capabilities, budgets and commitments align, is required? There are few easy answers, but as past experience shows many wrong or fanciful ones – and it is the dilemma of finding the *right* answers that Prime Minister Johnson's government now faces.

Endnotes

- 1 See Andrew M Dorman, Matthew RH Uttley and Benedict Wilkinson, 'The Curious Incident of Mr Cameron and the United Kingdom Defence Budget: A New Legacy?', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (2016), 46-53; also *The Daily Telegraph*, 'Obama to Cameron: maintain UK defence spending or weaken NATO', 10 February 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/11403519/Obama-to-Cameron-maintain-UK-defence-spending-or-weaken-Nato.html> (accessed 2 February 2021) and *The Guardian*, 'Cameron to reassure Nato over UK's defence spending at summit', 8 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jul/08/david-cameron-nato-summit-warsaw-uk-commitment-defence-spending> (accessed 2 February 2021). It should be noted that the 11 per cent figure was shaped by the response to the Korean War.
- 2 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/integrated-review-ministry-of-defence>
- 3 Although the US developed the Bell P-59 Airacomet, it was not suitable for use as a combat type. The Lockheed P-80 (later F-80) Shooting Star entered service in the last few weeks of the war, with a detachment in Italy. British jet engine development was well ahead of the United States at this point.
- 4 Macmillan in fact said that "Indeed let us be frank about it – most of our people have never had it so good. Go around the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime – nor indeed in the history of this country." (Speech to Bedford rally, 20 July 1957).
- 5 James Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (London: Harper Collins, 1987), 162.
- 6 See, *inter alia*, Richard Moore, 'F-111K: Britain's Lost Bomber', *Royal Air Force Air Power Review*, Vol. 18:3 (2015), 10-28.
- 7 The National Archives (TNA) CAB 129/181/21, Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975.
- 8 Of the five Black Buck sorties which reached the islands (two had to be aborted as a result of poor weather and equipment failure on one of the supporting tanker aircraft), only two were targeted against the runway. The final raid targeted airfield facilities with air burst bombs, but because of an error in fuse setting, the bombs exploded on impact with the ground, leading to a misapprehension that the raid was another aimed at closing the runway which has persisted ever since. See David Jordan and John Shields, 'The Most Daring Raid? The Royal Air Force, Operation Black Buck and the Falklands War, 1982', *RAF Air and Space Power Review*, Vol. 21:2 (2018), 86-109.
- 9 TNA, CAB 129/181/21, Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975.
- 10 David Clark, 'The Labour Party's Defence and Security Policy', *RUSI Journal*, April 1995, 11.
- 11 When Prime Minister Blair formed his first cabinet, David Clark was not – to some surprise amongst commentators – appointed as Secretary of State for Defence despite his shadowing the role in opposition, and George Robertson (now Lord Robertson of Port Ellen) was appointed to the position instead.
- 12 It was frequently claimed that Brown once said, 'a pound spent on defence is a pound wasted', although source evidence for this statement is lacking.
- 13 Bill Kincaid, 'Crisis in Defence Spending', *RUSI Commentary*, <https://rusi.org/commentary/crisis-defence-spending?qt-related=2&page=220> (accessed 11 July 2020)
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Press release, Ministry of Defence Major Projects Report 2009, <https://www.nao.org.uk/press-release/ministry-of-defence-major-projects-report-2009-2/> (accessed 18 June 2020); also see Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, *Ministry of Defence: Major Projects Report 2009*, HC85-1, Session 2009-10, <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/091085i.pdf> (accessed 18 July 2020).
- 16 See, for instance, Lewis Page, *Lions, Donkeys and Dinosaurs: Waste and Blundering in the Military* (London: Arrow, 2007); Sir Max Hastings, 'The Folly of Our War Machine', *The Guardian*, 27 January 2004 (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2004/jan/27/foreignpolicy.military>); Max Hastings, 'Giant Carriers are Symbols of Our National Delusions' *The Times*, 14 December 2019 (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/giant-carriers-are-symbols-of-our-national-delusions-vzg0pshtb>; behind paywall). All three cited sources have been subject of fierce argument and criticism of interpretations.
- 17 Operation SHADER, against Da'esh; Operation TORAL in Afghanistan (part of NATO's Operation Resolute Support) and Operation ELLAMY for Libya (Part of NATO's Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR).
- 18 The G7 ('Group of 7') has been through a series of designations, beginning as the G4 (the US, UK, France and Germany) and then G5 (the original G4 members and Japan) in meetings in 1973, the G6 (with the addition of Italy in 1976) and then G7 (with Canada's membership from 1976) and the G8 from 1998 with the addition of Russia. Russia's expulsion in 2014 because of the invasion of Crimea saw the group revert to the title of G7. President Donald Trump proposed expansion to a 10-strong group, suggesting the readmission of Russia and the addition of Australia and South Korea, but this seems unlikely to be pursued by the Biden administration.
- 19 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/global-britain-delivering-on-our-international-ambition> (accessed 14 August 2020).
- 20 Sir John Nott, 'The Nott Review', seminar held 20 June 2001, (Institute of Contemporary British History, 2002), 10-11 (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/assets/icbh-witness/nottreview.pdf>; accessed 15 July 2020).
- 21 'The Nott Review' being the shorthand for the Review's full title (Cmnd 8288, The UK Defence Programme: The Way Forward).
- 22 The retirement of the patrol vessel *Endurance* was criticised for sending a signal to the Argentine government that the defence of the Falklands was no longer of interest to the UK, while the announcement that the aircraft carrier *Invincible* would be sold to Australia has been interpreted by some commentators as meaning that the UK would have been down to a single aircraft carrier (the venerable HMS *Hermes*) which is slightly misleading. *Invincible's* sale would have occurred after the new HMS *Illustrious* entered service, and *Hermes* would have then retired upon the service entry of HMS *Ark Royal*. Nott's plan would not, as things stood, have left the Royal Navy with a single carrier.
- 23 Nott chose to retire the amphibious vessels earlier than planned, rather than making the decision to cut them, but then reversed the retirement plan completely. See Andrew Dorman, 'Viewpoint – The Nott Review: Dispelling the Myths?', *Defence Studies*, 1:3 (2001), 119. Also, Andrew M Dorman, 'John Nott and the Royal Navy: The 1981 Defence Review Revisited', *Contemporary British History* 15:2 (2001). Nott's decision to reverse the retirement plan was made *before* the war began.
- 24 See, for example, House of Commons Defence Select Committee, HC 950 *Operations in Libya* (2012) <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/writev/950/lib04.htm>, written evidence, CJA Cope, political editor *Warship World*.

- 25 The Tornado GR4 was able to use the Storm Shadow cruise missile, and while the weapon had been considered for use by the Harrier, it had been decided not to proceed; Harrier pilots were concerned that the weight of the weapon might provide a number of potentially dangerous challenges for carrier operation (I am grateful to two former Harrier pilots for this information). The notion that a combination of the submarine-launched Tomahawk cruise missile and 2,000lb laser guided weapons delivered by Harriers would have been able to cover the range of targets struck by Storm Shadow omitted to consider questions of risk beyond the potential range of combat search and rescue assets that this would have created on several occasions. The Harrier had not, at the point of retirement, been cleared to carry the Brimstone missile, and was incapable of carrying the RAPTOR reconnaissance pod, although it had an effective, if rather less capable, alternative pod (also carried by the Tornado).
- 26 Cm7498, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review* (2010), 27. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62482/strategic-defence-security-review.pdf
- 27 The controversies over the TSR2, F-111 and CVA-01 have consumed a great deal of ink, with analyses ranging from parochial single service perspectives through to more balanced treatments which have attempted to make use of evidence rather than prejudice. Amongst the best are Gjert Dyndal's *Land Based Air Power or Aircraft Carriers?: A Case Study of the British Debate about Maritime Air Power in the 1960s* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and David Faddy, 'The Cancellation of CVA-01 and the Initiation of the Future Carrier', *Defence Studies* 9:3 (2009). The controversy which emerged over the carrier and the RAF's 'island strategy' created an atmosphere between the RAF and RN which was described as 'deplorable' by the Committee on the Rationalisation of Air Power (TNA, AIR 20/1563, 'Report of the Committee on the Rationalisation of Air Power', 1965).
- 28 Although it is extremely unlikely that the RAF's Argosy transport force would have remained in service much beyond the early 1980s because of the limitations of that aircraft, the short-range tactical transport force of Hawker Siddeley Andovers and the heavy lift capability of the Shorts Belfast would have been of benefit for some years; the Belfasts, still in use by the Heavy Lift concern, had to be contracted to support the British deployment to the Gulf in 1990/91.

About the Freeman Air and Space Institute

The Freeman Air and Space Institute is an inter-disciplinary initiative of the School of Security Studies, King's College London. The Freeman Institute is dedicated to generating original knowledge and understanding of air and space issues. The Freeman Institute seeks to inform scholarly, policy and doctrinal debates in a rapidly evolving strategic environment characterised by transformative technological change which is increasing the complexity of the air and space domains.

The Freeman Institute places a priority on identifying, developing and cultivating air and space thinkers in academic and practical contexts, as well as informing, equipping and stimulating relevant air and space education provision at King's and beyond.

The Institute is named after Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman (1888–1953), who was crucially influential in British air capability development in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, making an important contribution to the Allied victory. He played a central role in the development of successful aircraft including the Spitfire, Lancaster and Mosquito, and in planning the wartime aircraft economy – the largest state-sponsored industrial venture in British history.

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