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The Strategic Defence Review process is underway, and already the signs are ominous for the UK and its role in the world. It is clear that the outcome will see the UK's military capabilities significantly, and probably permanently, diminished. It is an 'East of Suez' moment, a watershed. The Armed Forces will either have to undertake a radically different range of missions or, if the outcome of the SDR is a fudge whereby choices are avoided, the UK's military will be overexposed in future crises – perhaps disastrously so. What's worse is that there appears to be little clarity of thinking in Government about the general international strategy of the UK. Before policymakers work out how many soldiers, ships, and aeroplanes we need, they need to decide what world, or regional, role London will seek.

There has been some frightening news in recent days. First, the word from the Treasury is that George Osborne has decreed the cost of replacing the Trident submarines that house Britain's nuclear deterrent will have to be borne from within the main defence budget. To put it bluntly, that is disastrous. A trade-off between getting rid of nuclear weapons and having a decently-funded military, or keeping the weapons and crippling the military, is not a responsible choice: not least when all major politicians want the UK to play a significant role in global security, all of them recognise the centrality of the Armed Forces to fulfilling that task, and most of them are for replacing Trident. Osborne must be resisted. Trident is the ultimate insurance policy and, to be frank, those who assume we will not need it, either because Europe is now so pacific that we will never again be attacked, or to set an example to the likes of Iran, know little history.

There is absolutely no historical precedent for the belief that a state can cease paying attention to its security or its neighbours. We live in a Hobbesian world of realpolitik; and the UK should not trust France, Germany, Russia, or any other state for that matter, as far as she can throw them. Moreover, Simon Heffer reports that David Cameron and his inner circle are busy attempting to weaken the position of the Defence Secretary, Liam Fox, in order to control their own Tory backbenchers. There are plenty of precedents for this kind of behaviour, and if true, then it is a disgrace.

It gets worse. On 7 August, The Daily Telegraph reported that one option being played with at the MOD involves major cuts of 5,000 troops for the Army along with up to 4,000 of its 10,000 armoured vehicles. The Territorial Army could be cut in half, while the Parachute regiment and the Marines might be merged. So does this involve a shift towards a different model British military, with emphasis placed not on ground forces? Not that I can see. All 120 Tornado aircraft – due to stay in service until 2025 – face the axe in order to avoid the cost of a refit. But the Eurofighter Typhoon order will be reduced from 160 to 107, and – sit down – the planes be based at a single airfield. Now, all a nuclear-armed adversary would need to do is to annihilate that airbase, and there goes the RAF's command of the air over the UK.

The order of new Joint Strike Fighters, meanwhile, which will be shared with the Navy for its new aircraft carriers, is to be cut from 150 to less than 50. There seems to be a dangerous assumption at work here, that the UK will not need to defend its airspace, or use airpower to support troops onshore. As far as the Navy goes, the two new large aircraft carriers are guaranteed. Given that the Navy has already been gutted, there is little scope for cutting back still further (but one quarter of amphibious landing ships face the axe, and there are to be long-term disruptions in training). But one of the new carriers will probably become a 'utility carrier' (at a cost of how many billions?) used for amphibious assault. The other one will have the JSFs onboard. Which leaves the question: will that carrier be too vulnerable to actually use?

The MOD risks cutting back on mass to the point that Britain will end up deterring herself, not an enemy, with what remains, because the dangers of putting the Armed Forces into harm's way is too high. Thinking in the Royal Navy is particularly suspect in this regard. The Navy seems to be willing to accept markedly fewer numbers of ships if they are, technologically speaking, very advanced. The problem is that even the best ship can only be in one place at a time, and many naval roles – escort duties, anti-piracy, anti-submarine warfare – require a significant number of vessels to be involved. Naval interdiction is also a key component of curtailing WMD proliferation, while energy and food security loom as real problems in the coming years. And, once again, do the ships involved become so fantastically expensive that the UK will be frightened to risk them being sunk? Numbers can be cut so far, and quality should rightly be emphasised, but there is a tipping point at which quantity is necessary as well.

Therefore the coalition Government needs to develop a clear, overarching strategy for the Armed Forces and their role in advancing UK national interests. The biggest question is whether or not it is desirable for Britain to retain an expeditionary force structure. If it is, then the Armed Forces must be financed accordingly. It seems, to me at least, madness to assume that the future will consist of more wars like Afghanistan; there is no political will to do long-term occupations, for one thing. It is perhaps more sensible for the UK to plan its strategy around the facts of geography: Britain is an island nation. The Government should focus on naval power, with a strong air component. An emphasis on the Royal Navy would permit the UK to defend the waterways around the British Isles, and operate in some capacity further afield – either in a coalition operation, or, at a push, in a Falklands-style conflict fighting alone.

Britain must also be able to contribute to the defence of the sea lines of communication which are so vital to our status as a trading nation. The maritime force must be supplemented by airpower in the form of adequate numbers of both the Typhoon and JSFs, affording the means to protect both the fleet itself and land forces operating onshore, as well as defend the UK itself if necessary. The Army could be significantly slimmed down in order to finance this, but retain a capacity for limited, high-intensity conventional operations on a strictly short-term basis. In the round, this model would, for instance, enable the UK to fight independently against a weaker state (like in the Falklands) or make a contribution to a coalition operation, in terms of rapidly defeating an enemy like Saddam's Iraq. While it is unlikely that the UK will be able to take the lead across a theatre – like Basra in 2003 – the Army will still be able to offer a major contribution to that sort of task. But garrison duties should emphatically be left to others, as should humanitarian operations. Armed Forces with a stress on naval and airpower, and a smaller but high-impact land component, will provide the best hedge: defence of the UK itself,

the maintenance of some expeditionary capability, an ability to operate independently in certain conditions, and the means to play a role in a coalition.

This model for the Armed Forces is certainly the most expensive of the options available, but given the lack of appetite for an isolationist posture, the need to defend the UK itself in an unforeseen contingency (there is little point in being able to perform a peacekeeping occupation thousands of miles away if the British state cannot perform its most basic function: the defence of the realm), and the difficulty of guessing how future threats will develop, this framework is the most strategically flexible. The emphasis in reshaping the Armed Forces should be on, in this order, defending the UK and breaking things – the classic tasks of the military. While the leftist intelligentsia cannot stomach this fact, the reality is that the ability to apply organised violence still remains the key to international relations and, given the state of the world, this is likely to increase, not diminish, in the years to come. The years since 1991 have been very far from peaceful. Western Europe is the only part of the globe where pacific sentiments are actually taken seriously. The Government should pay no attention to those siren voices.

Elsewhere, it seems probable that in future the UK will fight in coalition operations, either alongside the US or, perhaps less likely, with European allies. But London must retain some capacity for independent action, both in terms of defending the UK itself and also, at a push, being able to protect the overseas territories and safeguard wider British interests abroad. This is a sine qua non for force planning. Meanwhile those who believe that Europe is now an utterly safe region fail to take into account key drivers of state behaviour. The United States acts as the guarantor of European security. Without that, European states will have no option but to hedge against one another. And Washington's interest in Europe weakens by the year. There is every indication that US involvement in European affairs will erode still further, and thus there may come a point at which the people of Europe have to do the one thing they have not had to do for a very long time: take responsibility for their own security.

The increased Anglo-French defence co-operation of recent years isn't done for fun; such alignments have targets. The only conceivable targets are Germany and Russia, the two greatest threats to regional security. Russia is a country in terminal decline, and has in recent years begun to throw her weight around in protest at this fact. Germany doesn't have to make mature security decisions because of the Americans; but if the US commitment slackens, and Russia starts making trouble on her eastern flank, then Berlin will have no choice but to assert her regional pre-eminence. And if Germany does that, the rest of Europe will swallow very hard – EU or no EU.

The UK can be reasonably optimistic about the potential for stability in Europe – not least given the fact that nuclear weapons deter war – but should not just assume that the determinants of state behaviour since time immemorial have suddenly ceased to operate. They have not, and thus London must be prepared to defend UK interests in this region of the world. Beyond that, Britain needs a coherent strategy. Staying out of trouble spots if at all possible has much to recommend it – and was once the country's grand strategy – but that would require a less activist stance from politicians, and still demands a combination of flexibility and effectiveness in the Armed Forces. In the years following 1945, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin crafted a grand strategy for Britain that has endured to the present – entangle the United States in Europe, and,

via the 'special relationship', solve the UK's security problems. That policy may at last unravel in the years to come, and a new one is needed. The Government must not duck the challenge.