

Former UK CGS General Sir Mike Jackson, tempted to play a little fantasy defence spending, came out solidly in favour of retaining the carriers, vital to preserving the UK's operational independence.

Speaking at the House of Commons as the guest of the All Party Group on Transatlantic and International Security and the Henry Jackson Society on 28th April, the General stressed that he would like to keep all the sweets in the sweetshop, but, if really pressed, saw the retention of the carriers and the renewal of the nuclear deterrent as indispensable to the defence of the realm.

If cuts are unavoidable, the first out the door may be the air power. 232 Eurofighters – which do not operate from carriers. So we purchase the Joint Strike Fighter, which does, giving us over 400 fast jets. These may represent capabilities whose worth is disproportionate to their expense; ditto our submarines.

The General says that we are making strategic airlift work, with the exception of the C-17, and questions the retention of the DC10 and Tristar, vintage 1962. They are becomingly increasingly, and increasingly expensively, unreliable.

Financially squeezed, US defence spending and procurement is trimmed to deal with today's counterinsurgency requirements at the expense of planning for future conventional conflicts.

The UK, whose long term strategic interests historically coincide with those of its North American ally, has not matched commitments with resources. In the economic crisis defence spending has been bumped to the bottom of the pile. What are the implications of short term responses to immediate crises at the expense of long range planning, and what can be done to balance often contradictory requirements in the face of an unpredictable and ominous future?

The General largely avoids overt prescription, but asserts that the 1998 Strategic Defence Review still underpins defence planning assumptions posited on a world now fundamentally altered by the events of the last decade.

A new administration could and ought to conduct a new SDR to weigh up the new realities and balance our defence spending accordingly. (Speaking today Opposition Leader David Cameron, seen briefly at a defence event yesterday, the parliamentary Welcome Home for the Royal Air Force, said we must "review all commitments across the piece" and while there were good cases for defence spending, in the age of austerity we must "live within our means for the longer term".)

Critical of the current procurement processes (but enthusiastic about Urgent Operational Requirements), the General observes that multinational projects tend to cost twice as long and cost twice as much. If we do not buy British, our industrial and skills base will not be maintained.

This might cost around 50% more than buying abroad; but the excess should not be paid

through the defence budget, but through Business and Enterprise.

After all, the General points out, defence of the realm is the first and fundamental duty of any government; but the propping up of British industry is also the job of government – not of defence.