By Andras Besterczey

The last comprehensive formulation of defence policy, the Strategic Defence Review, is over a decade old, and policy and reality have greatly diverged. Now the British Army especially is overstretched in an unpopular stability operation – critically, unlike in the US we do not consider ourselves to be at war - with little political support. The issue surfaces in mainstream media from time to time with the debate surrounding the shortage of helicopters and criticism of the government for their lack of foresight to spend more on equipment required now rather than planning for future conflicts.

These criticisms miss the point. Ad-hoc equipment purchases to correct short-term issues are not sufficient and represent only the tip of the much wider issue of British foreign policy in the twenty-first century. There needs to be a public debate on Britain's role in the world and how it will choose to engage with future conflicts and security challenges that we are likely to face. Expenditure must subsequently match these goals and threats because the current situation of attempting to maintain technological superiority in high mobility warfare with the two new aircraft carriers and the Joint Strike Fighter, among others, while engaging in massive counter-insurgency operations, all on a peace-time budget, is practically impossible. With core defence expenditure at only 2.3% of GDP, the lowest since the Great Depression, the overwhelmed military's morale has fallen rapidly, with nearly half of all ranks reportedly considering resignation. Resignations have been accelerating in the previous five years culminating in 20,000 resignations in 2007/8. Furthermore, the current core budget of £33bn is set to grow by only 1½% annually in real terms in the next 3 years, whereas equipment costs are rising by 6% to 8%.

There are two broad options for scaling down depending on how one views Britain's place in the international arena. If stability operations are henceforth seen as the norm there should be a re-focus towards expeditionary warfare with territorial defence left to allies. Considering that if Britain faced an existential threat it is implausible that the US and Europe would remain outside of the conflict this scenario does not threaten Britain's ability to defend its border. Hence the nuclear deterrent would be inappropriate and £20bn could be used to buy more armoured vehicles, helicopters and other items used in Sierra Leone, Afghanistan or Iraq. With increasing Franco-German cooperation in European defence initiatives this is an entirely plausible option which would draw Britain closer to its allies; however, would meet the stiffest resistance from within Whitehall from people who do not wish to see Britain's military capability vis-a-vis other nations reduced. Many experts point to the 2008 Georgian-Russian conflict to demonstrate that inter-state war has not been eliminated and will make a resurgence as the BRIC countries especially become stronger and the US becomes less able to act as the final arbiter.

An alternative option is that the military returns to the traditional role of defending the realm against industrialised nations who pose an existential threat. Engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown that force has limited utility when used to settle political activities, with neither

country in a remotely satisfactory state after immeasurable human suffering. In particular the utility of force in propping-up states has been bought into question as in Afghanistan the parliament rejected President Karzai's government even as President Obama dispatched a further 30,000 soldiers. Moreover, these engagements pull us away from the mechanised high-mobility warfare that NATO soldiers have practiced for the last 50 years into a complex mix of peace-enforcement, counter-insurgency and nation-building operations which the public have little appetite for. The requirements of these operations are still insufficiently understood, with the reality being that none of the military operations based on liberal interventionism in the previous two decades proving to be a clear success. However, this alternative would be catastrophic for our relationship with our allies, especially the Americans. When the Foreign and Commonwealth Office declared before Christmas that due to budget constraints it will be forced to reduce its presence in numerous countries, the US and our European allies were aware that they would be required to increase their presence. Hence if Britain began a wholesale disengagement from all but the most crucial areas, namely Europe, it would signal the end of centuries of foreign policy and would necessitate a corresponding search for a new mindset and strategic culture. Although painful this may be better than maintaining illusions of global reach while the British economy takes longer than that of any EU country to recover from the current recession.

Neither of these two options seems likely, regardless of what the next general election will bring for the simple reason that no political party is likely to advocate a serious reduction in British influence, even if such a policy would save billions. However, if the current course is maintained it would require a significant rise in expenditure, perhaps 40%, which will permit the completion of the aircraft carriers alongside the acquisition of equipment required in Afghanistan. (This is the figure given by the UK National Defence Association, a group of retired senior officers and civil servants campaigning to revive the military.) Such an increase would be difficult for the public to accept unless the debate concerning the nation's future is an open one; otherwise both the political will and general consensus for a real revival of the military will be lacking. The British Armed Forces will merely stumble on, occasionally propped up with a handful of new armoured vehicles or IED jammers. The public must play a leading role in deciding what it is they wish their nation to represent, and how much they are willing to pay for.