The Strategic Defence and Security Review – missing the point?

Paul Rogers argues that only with a fundamental change in approach will the UK's defence and security strategies be 'fit for purpose'.

The Strategic Defence and Security Review[1] (SDSR), completed by the government in October, was conducted at a time of crisis for the Ministry of Defence (MoD). There were three main reasons for this crisis – all of them related to finance – but beyond this is the overarching problem that the SDSR has continued to fail to address the really important issues facing UK defence policy.

At its heart, the MoD's financial crisis was simply due to the existing budget being inadequate to meet commitments. Put bluntly, the MoD needed an increase of around 15% just to break even, given the unexpected costs of the war in Afghanistan and the rapidly rising costs of some key new projects. On top of this came the coalition government's policy to make substantial cuts in public spending. While the MoD escaped the very large cuts earmarked for some departments, it will still see its budget cut by 8% in real terms over the next four years. These two factors together mean that the MoD is facing a budget that is perhaps a quarter less than it actually believes it needs.

Add to this a third factor – two huge new forty-year projects that are both front-loaded, with heavy capital spending due in the next decade. The one that is best known is the proposed replacement for the Trident nuclear weapons system with estimated £100 billion lifetime costs[2] but proportionately much more in the short term. The other project is the building of two massive new aircraft carriers. At over 60,000 tonnes each, the *Queen Elizabeth*-class ships will be by far the largest warship ever deployed by the Royal Navy, the nearest ships any country will have to the US Navy's *Nimitz*-class super-carriers. The new warships will give the UK a 'global reach' but are also planned to deploy the hugely expensive F-35 multi-role fighter and will require an array of support ships to operate effectively.

Britain may still be seeking to be a mini-superpower but the strains are showing. In order to afford the cost of both new carriers, cuts elsewhere mean that the Navy will have no capability to launch fighter planes from *any* carrier for the next decade. The decision on whether to proceed with Trident replacement has been delayed until after the next general election.

Questions are even being raised within the MoD about whether a like-for-like replacement is needed – a quite extraordinary development considering the sacred-cow status of Britain's nuclear force.

The much bigger problem is that this whole issue of meeting the costs of the new programmes has obscured the need for a much more in-depth review over what the UK's security policy should actually be. Instead, it is far too much a matter of a limited approach that focuses on a narrow interpretation of 'defence' being protecting the state, rather than understanding the nature of future security challenges.

What is dismaying about this is that within the Ministry of Defence there has been some quite innovative thinking about global security trends. The main think-tank, the Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre[3] (DCDC) at Shrivenham near Swindon has carried out some significant analyses that point to issues such as climate change, energy and food shortages and socio-economic divisions as major drivers of global insecurity. DCDC sees some of these leading to major problems of economic marginalisation and increased numbers of fragile and failing states as well as mass migration driven by desperation.

Furthermore, this line of thinking has begun to emerge at a more central level, featuring in both the Labour government's 2008 National Security Strategy (NSS), and the coalition government's NSS,[4] which was published at the same time as the SDSR.

However, there remains a central problem in the whole approach. While recognising the nature of these evolving challenges, the basic response is one of trying to isolate the UK from the dangers and protecting the state, either on its own or more likely in alliances with other like-minded states. In the face of a potentially unstable and dangerous world, the focus of the government's approach is to maintain security, if need be by the use of force, rather than addressing the underlying causes of the insecurity. It is very much a case of closing the castle gates in the face of uncertainty and threat. It can best be described as classic 'liddism' – keep the lid on rather than turn down the heat.

The requirement, then, is for the government's strategies to go much further than conventional defence thinking and take a realistic look at the

The UK government is not ready to give up nuclear weapons just yet

challenges facing the world community – an economically polarised and environmentally constrained system. This would then start the process of recognising the need for a fundamental change of outlook. If this were to happen, then one outcome would be a rapid transition to a low carbon, emancipatory economy. This would be seen to be at the core of the UK's security interests, a radically different outcome but one much more in tune with what is really needed.

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References
(web links correct as of 1 December 2010)

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