

An element of stability

The British Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015

Kees Homan

What are the results of the British Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) 2015? Which military branches are the 'winners'? And how does the SDSR fit in the possibility of a British exit from the EU?¹

The British Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 was published on 23 November.² The last SDSR in 2010 was a worrisome affair. Against the background of the financial crisis, restoring the country's fiscal health was seen as the most important security priority.³ The justification offered for cuts imposed by the SDSR 2010 was that Britain's finances were in such a poor state that defense had to take a back seat.⁴ Despite the officially announced spending reduction of only 7.5%, the effective cut was more than 20%. This 2010 review reduced capabilities, force numbers, readiness and ambition. For a country supposed to be proud of its military heritage and armed forces, it was an unacceptable debacle that should have humiliated the government more than it did.

SDSR 2015

Because the space for this article is limited, it will not go into the whole of the 'government's' approach to the review, but will focus on the main aspects of the defense dimension of the SDSR 2015. This 'assertive' review is meant to give Britain's armed forces what they need to defeat the terrorist threat and keep the UK safe for generations to come. The government acknowledges that the rapidly changing geopolitical situation posed by Russian aggression, security

across NATO's southern borders, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, and the growing pressures on homeland security required a revised approach.

The main threats for the UK that the review identifies are cyber-security, espionage, state-based threats and terrorism, including the so-called Islamic State (IS). Defense gets a ring-fenced budget of 2% of GDP — £38 billion. It is to be increased by 0.5% per year for five years. About £178 billion has been earmarked for equipment for the next 10 years.

The budget for cyber-security sees a doubling of investment of £1.9 billion over five years, and the armed forces are also now to assist with national recovery from significant cyber incidents.

Nineteen hundred new spies will be recruited for the security services. As the government is still seeking to reduce the budget deficit, the review targets a challenging 30% reduction among civil servants (41,000 positions).

Results

The big winners are the special forces, the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Special Boat Service (SBS). Their £2 billion will be spent on planes, helicopters, other equip-



A Eurofighter Typhoon. The life of this combat aircraft will be extended, and this will have the effect of increasing the number of front-line Typhoon squadrons from five to seven (photo: Flickr/Tony Hisgett)

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ment, and weapons. The 14 RAF C130J Hercules aircraft, which also can be used by special forces, will be retained. The number of drones is to be doubled to at least 20 of a new generation of Protector drones, which replace the Reaper aircraft.

A Joint Force 2025 of around 50,000 will be developed. The previous target was 30,000. The Joint Force must be able to work alongside the security and intelligence agencies to disrupt threats in the most challenging operating environments worldwide.

The international dimension of SDSR 2015 is reflected in the UK's promoting of defense cooperation and overseas partnerships. NATO remains at the heart of the UK's defense policy. British work in NATO includes a UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force involving Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Royal Navy

In terms of spending, the Navy is a beneficiary with a renewed commitment to the new nuclear deterrent, the operation of a second aircraft carrier, and a future submarine capability beyond the Astute Hunter/Killers that are now entering service. The total number of frigates and destroyers will remain at 19.

The Royal Navy will acquire a new fleet of Type 26 Frigates, which will cost £4 billion. The Type 26 Global Combat Ship plans offer a useful set of upgrades over the existing flotilla of frigates. However, the government will purchase only 8 ships, rather than the 13 wanted by the Navy. This number, nonetheless, should be enough to provide adequate protection for the Queen Elizabeth-class carriers. The Navy and Royal Marines currently have 30,060 personnel.

The Navy is also making progress as newer vessels, such as the seven planned Astute Class of Hunter/Killer nuclear-powered submarines and the aircraft carriers, are on track. The six Type 45 air defense destroyers will be retained.

The cost of providing four new submarines for the Trident nuclear program has jumped by about 20%. The cost of the four submarines amounts to £31 billion over the course of twenty years, up from £25 billion nine years ago.

Royal Air Force

The 31,830-strong Royal Air Force does well in the SDSR: the review assures two additional Typhoon squadrons and an

extra squadron of F35 Lightning combat aircraft to operate from the Navy's new aircraft carriers. The purchase of the F35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft will be accelerated, making 24 aircraft available on the UK's two new aircraft carriers by 2023. The overall plan to buy 138 F-35's remains unchanged.

The life of the Eurofighter Typhoon combat aircraft will be extended, and this will have the effect of increasing the number of front-line Typhoon squadrons from five to seven.

Nine new Boeing PB maritime patrol aircraft will be purchased, filling a gap left by the highly criticized decision in the last review in 2010 to scrap a new generation of Nimrod aircraft. The nine aircraft will be used for maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare, and anti-surface ship warfare. They will protect the nuclear deterrent as well as the new carriers.

The British Army

Due to the effects of continuing severity measures, the force that suffers most probably is the Army. New vehicle programs fall victim to further cuts. However, the 2015 review provides for the army to return to its pre-2010 target of generating a divisional-sized force at six-months' notice, instead of a year. This war-fighting division will be optimized for high-intensity combat operations.

Most important, the Army will increase its readiness and it will have two new 5,000-strong "strike brigades". They are being created out of its existing 82,230 personnel. The brigades will be equipped to deploy across the globe using the army's new generation of Ajax armored vehicles and a new wheeled mechanized infantry vehicle. These strike brigades can be rapidly deployed and are to be created by 2025.

A number of infantry battalions will be reconfigured to provide an increased contribution to countering terrorism and building stability overseas. Apache attack and RAF Chinook support helicopters and Warrior fighting vehicles will be upgraded. The Reserves will continue to grow to 35,000, with increased investment in training and equipment and improved pay and conditions.

"Brexit"

An important issue that may have a major impact on Britain's future security and defense policy is its membership in the EU.⁵ In the near future, the UK will hold a referendum on whether to remain a member of the EU. Prime

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Minister David Cameron said the elements of his European bargain include the areas of European economic governance and competitiveness as well as aspects of sovereignty and immigration.⁶

Robin Niblett, director of Chatham House, who opposes a “Brexit”, has rightly called for a different British mindset and strategy towards its place in the world: a world, according to Niblett, in which Britain is surrounded by three concentric circles of influence. The first “inner circle” is the EU, the region with which the UK’s relationships need to be strongest and most active.⁷ Niblett concludes that if Britain stays a member of the European Union, it would have the opportunity to use its economic size, diplomatic skills and networks, and broader national capabilities to play a leading role in defining and leveraging more effective EU-wide policies.

Alongside France, the UK is viewed as one of the most important actors in EU defense. European defense is almost unthinkable without the strong involvement of the UK. A “Brexit” reduces the UK’s influence on both Europe and the United States.

European defense is almost unthinkable without strong UK involvement

In the long run, intensive defense cooperation within Europe will not only save money, but also will harmonize strategic cultures, making cooperation more likely. It may create a sort of “virtuous circle” that will in the long term

contribute to a more cohesive European foreign policy. The unpredictability of the future security environment requires greater coordination and effectiveness from European forces. A small reduction in national strategic autonomy is more profitable than the far greater loss in power and influence.

Final remarks

The outcome of this review is much better than was expected. The review provides a welcome element of stability in defense planning and helps to reverse the perception of a power in retreat. When the next SDSR is published, it will be interesting to see how the world has evolved and whether the UK’s plans developed this year were well chosen to meet the demands of 2015-2020.

In summary, the F35 Joint Strike Fighter, aircraft carriers, Type 45 destroyers, Astute Class submarines, and Type 26 Global Combat Ships all represent choices that provide the British armed forces with advanced capabilities in their respective roles. A final question is whether, after the recent terrorist attacks, the review is sufficiently flexible in identifying and prioritizing potential threats. Hopefully, the British political leadership will agree that European cooperation, far from reducing national sovereignty, is the only way to cope with those threats.

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1. The manuscript of this article was finished on 29 November 2015.
2. *SDSR 2015*, London, November 2015.
3. “Doing with less”, *The Economist*, 20 June 2015.
4. Kees Homan, ‘The Empire slides back’. Heroverwegingen in Brits defensie- en veiligheidsbeleid’, *Atlantisch Perspectief* nummer 1, 2011, pp. 4-11.
5. Nick Witney, “Engaging with Iran: BREXIT to Nowhere: A Europe at the Foreign Policy Agenda Consequences of ‘out’”, European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2015, www.ecfr.eu.
6. “David Cameron sets out EU reform goals”, *BBC News*, 11 November 2015.
7. Robin Niblett, *Britain, Europe and the World: Rethinking the UK's Circles of Influence*, Chatham House, 19 October 2015.