Re-thinking defence to meet new threats: Government response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2014–15

Second Special Report of Session 2015–16

Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 21 July 2015
The Defence Committee

The Defence Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Ministry of Defence and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP (Conservative, New Forest East) (Chair)
Richard Benyon MP (Conservative, Newbury)
Douglas Chapman MP (Scottish National Party, Dunfermline and West Fife)
Mr James Gray MP (Conservative, North Wiltshire)
Conor McGinn MP (Labour, St Helens North)
Johnny Mercer MP (Conservative, Plymouth, Moor View)
Mrs Madeleine Moon MP (Labour, Bridgend)
Jim Shannon MP (Democratic Unionist Party, Strangford)
Ruth Smeeth MP (Labour, Stoke-on-Trent North)
Rt Hon John Spellar MP (Labour, Warley)
Bob Stewart MP (Conservative, Beckenham)

Powers

The committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in the House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee’s website at www.parliament.uk/defcom and by The Stationery Office by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the inquiry page of the Committee’s website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are James Davies (Clerk), Leoni Kurt (Second Clerk), Megan Edwards (Committee Specialist), Eleanor Scarnell (Committee Specialist), Ian Thomson (Committee Specialist), David Nicholas (Senior Committee Assistant), Alison Pratt and Carolyn Bowes (Committee Assistants).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Defence Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 5857; the Committee’s email address is defcom@parliament.uk. Media inquiries should be addressed to Alex Paterson on 020 7219 1589.
Second Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Tenth Report of Session 2014–15 on Re-thinking defence to meet new threats on 24 March 2015. The Government’s response was received on 16 July 2015 and is appended to this report.

Government response

The Government welcomes the House of Commons Defence Committee’s inquiry into ‘Re-thinking Defence to meet new threats’ and the findings set out in the Committee’s report published on 24 March 2015.

In 2010 the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR 2010), outlined a future force structured to give us the ability to deploy highly capable assets quickly across the range of operating environments but also able to provide a basis for greater scale and range of capability if required. Recent events in the Middle East, Ukraine and Africa underscore the importance of the flexible approach we followed in Future Force 2020. Today our armed forces are engaged in more than 20 ongoing operations across the world.

We are confident in the crucial contribution Defence continues to make towards protecting national security and upholding the international system. Defence capabilities support counter-terrorism and ensure the integrity of our territorial waters and airspace. Through Defence Engagement, we are able to shape events to prevent the spread of conflict and instability and build the capability of our partners. We are also able to respond with significant military force, if required, working with our Allies and partners, should aggressors threaten the rules-based systems which are essential to our security and prosperity.

The Committee’s report into ‘Re-thinking Defence to meet new threats’ is timely as we conduct the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, which is practically appraising national security and foreign policy objectives in a rapidly changing environment, which offers both threats and opportunities. The Government is grateful for the reflections and recommendations the Committee has provided on important issues for our national security.

Some of the specific areas raised by the Committee, such as equipment capability choices, are being actively considered as part of SDSR 2015. Further detail will be provided as part of this process. The Cabinet Office-led Review has begun and is analysing how evolving threats can be best met. With our major commitments in Afghanistan now delivered, this Review presents an opportunity to refresh our thinking about the roles of Defence and about the way in which we direct and deliver Defence activity within the wider national security context.

Where we have taken issue with elements of the Committee’s analysis, we have detailed our disagreement and laid out clear reasoning for our position.
The Government recognises the detailed work that the Committee has undertaken. Our formal response to the recommendations and conclusions made in the inquiry report, ‘Re-thinking defence to meet new threats’ are set out below. The Committee’s findings are highlighted in bold, with the Government’s response in plain text. For ease of reference, paragraph numbering follows that in the ‘Conclusions and Recommendations’ section of the Committee’s Report.

The House of Commons Defence Committee’s Recommendations and Government Response

1. The US has made it clear that it perceives the UK’s commitment as the lynchpin of the broader NATO commitment to increase Defence Spending. And, therefore, if the UK were to reduce expenditure, it would undermine the alliance as a whole. (Paragraph 58)

2. We are concerned that, should defence spending in the UK fall below the NATO target of 2% of GDP in 2016–17, the impact on the UK’s credibility as a military ally would be extremely damaging, particularly in the eyes of the US and our European partners. It would damage UK leadership in NATO and Putin’s Russia will be looking very carefully for signs of weakness in NATO. (Paragraph 59)

The UK continues to be a major player on the world stage, with a global power projection capability second in NATO only to the US. We have the second largest Defence budget in NATO and the largest in the EU. The Chancellor committed in the summer budget to the Government meeting the properly measured NATO pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence every year of this decade. The Budget also announced that the MOD’s budget will rise by 0.5% per year from 2016/17 to 2020/21, and up to an additional £1.5Bn per year by 2020/21 will be made available to be allocated to the Armed Forces and Security and Intelligence agencies through the Strategic Defence and Security Review and Spending Review. These will determine the priorities for investment so that the UK has a full suite of capabilities with which to respond to defence and security threats.

There are challenges to the international rules based system, and the UK is at the forefront of Allied efforts to meet those challenges. As the Defence Secretary made clear at the recent NATO Defence Ministerial meeting, the UK’s commitment to NATO is significant and enduring. Our commitments include Royal Air Force Typhoon aircraft conducting Baltic Air Policing duties this year and next, and 4,000 troops exercising with eastern Allies during 2015 – up from 3,000 in 2014. The UK remains at the forefront of the development of NATO’s new ‘spearhead’ brigade, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, and we will lead the VJTF in 2017. We will also provide a Battlegroup of around 1000 every year through to 2021. This represents fresh UK military leadership in NATO, following the creation of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) which will be fully operational by 2018. We also provide NATO’s Allied Rapid Reaction Corps and NATO’s Maritime Command at Northwood.

As we re-affirmed at the Wales Summit, the UK and all NATO allies are fully committed to upholding our obligations under the Washington Treaty.
3. Maritime surveillance remains a crucial gap in the capabilities of the Armed Forces with extremely serious implications for the protection of other capabilities within the Armed Forces. Bridging this critical capability gap must be a very high priority for the next Strategic Defence and Security Review. (Paragraph 66)

As the Committee’s report reflects, the Government decided to accept a maritime surveillance capability gap following the decision not to bring the Nimrod MRA4 into service in SDSR 2010. At the time of its cancellation the programme was £800m over budget; it had missed its original delivery date by seven years, and not a single aircraft had entered service. We have sought to mitigate the gap through employment of other assets, as well as through co-operation with allies. The SDSR will reconsider the requirement for a maritime patrol aircraft, and the decision will be informed by the latest threat assessments, as well as the conclusions of recent studies into the capabilities required from such an aircraft.

4. We are concerned that bringing the second carrier into service will involve very considerable additional costs, additional manpower, extra aircraft and the considerable amount of support and protection needed to make it viable. It makes little sense to maintain an additional aircraft carrier without aircraft to fly off it and the necessary aircraft, surface ships and submarines to protect it. In response to this Report, the Government should set out its assessment of the consequences of its decision to bring the second carrier into service for the other capabilities that will be required by the UK Armed Forces. It should also set out the consequences for the personnel required in the Royal Navy. If there is to be no increase in Royal Navy manpower, then it should set out how the second carrier will be manned and what effect the manning of the second carrier will have on the rest of the fleet. (Paragraph 88)

The Government recognises that the new aircraft carrier capability involves a large investment in manpower, aircraft, protection and support. Careful analysis of the entire capability, both the operational employment and the investment choices, has and will continue to be undertaken to support decisions. This will ensure that an effective, credible and affordable capability is delivered which meets the goals set by Government. We are taking the opportunity of the SDSR to determine how best to employ both ships. The analysis also includes the full spectrum of roles that the carriers will be required to undertake, from carrier strike and amphibious operations to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and Defence Engagement. An important part of this work will be to decide how best to meet the manning requirement for this new capability. We will inform the Committee of our conclusions once the SDSR 2015 has been completed.

5. These are only examples of the kinds of capability, which may be required to provide firmer conventional deterrent against an advanced military state such as Russia. But even this short list—maritime surveillance aircraft, CBRN capabilities, Ballistic Missile Defence, a comprehensive carrier strike capability, more Royal Navy vessels and Royal Air Force planes, and enhanced divisional manoeuvre and armoured capacity in the military and possible pre-positioning of troops in continental Europe, will require a significantly increased Defence budget. (Paragraph 98)
The Government notes the Committee’s assessment of the capabilities that might merit increased investment in the light of the changing security environment. We can assure the Committee that we will be looking very closely at the evolving threats to our interests in the SDSR. This work will inform the future content of the Defence programme and future investment decisions. We are also undertaking work to ensure we improve Defence productivity and efficiency to get better value for every pound we spend.

6. We urge the MoD to re-establish a Defence Historical Analysis and Conflict Research Centre in order to address the lessons of recent conflicts and to investigate current trends in warfare. (Paragraph 101)

Within the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) at Shrivenham, the Ministry of Defence runs a Lessons Cell which facilitates and coordinates the capture, analysis and synthesis of pan-Defence themes emerging from evidence we collect. This is overseen by a Defence-wide Lessons Board, which is responsible for the overall lessons process. Complementing this contemporary analysis, DCDC researches and analyses past conflicts, which provides an ability to view current events in the light of earlier campaigns where the background and context is better understood. The Defence Lessons Library also records single-Service, joint and Allied doctrinal lessons as well as those from potential coalition partners, other government departments and non-government organisations.

7. We are unclear as to how work on cyber warfare has developed in the Armed Forces. The Government should tell us when it will finalise its doctrine and guidance on the use of cyber defence and warfare. (Paragraph 110)

The Government notes the Committee’s comments on Cyber. Since the Committee examined this issue in the report Defence and Cyber Security in 2012, the Ministry of Defence has continued to develop and to mainstream Cyber in Defence through the Defence Cyber Programme. On the specific question of doctrine, we confirmed in our 2013 response to Defence and Cyber Security that the Department had drawn up doctrine on Cyber. We noted then that it is sensitive information and that remains the case. However, doctrine must reflect current thinking and, as the Committee has noted, Cyber evolves with great speed. We are therefore developing new material in this area which we expect to issue later this year to update that which already exists. This will include material explaining how international humanitarian law applies to cyber in the military context.

It is also worth clarifying some points made in the Report. The Committee stated that the UK has declared that it has an offensive capability led by the RAF. In fact we have declared an intent to develop an offensive cyber capability and regard the development of Cyber, whether to enable freedom of manoeuvre or potentially to deliver effects, as a Joint activity. This is led by the Commander of Joint Forces Command.

8. We welcome the Armed Forces’ focus on keeping pace with the developments of the “information age” in gathering intelligence. The fast pace of change requires the Armed Forces to exploit all areas of expertise and we call on the MOD to examine opportunities for work in partnership with academics and the private sector. However, the gathering of intelligence represents only part of the picture. Combating asymmetric
subversion and understanding ambiguous Russian tactics also requires a deep understanding of the country itself. Re-developing and maintaining the capacity for proper analysis and assessment of events in Russia and other areas where the UK Armed Forces may be engaged is as important as the gathering of intelligence itself. (Paragraph 114)

We are grateful for the Committee’s observations about improving intelligence within Defence. We continue to invest in the further development and professionalisation of our people to deal with an increasingly complex world with increasing flows of information. The Department has long-established links with academic partners and think-tanks (such as the International Institute of Strategic Studies, Royal United Services Institute, the London School of Economics and King’s College London). These are an invaluable source of independent thinking. We are also well aware of the potential opportunities for closer engagement with elements of the private sector and, where appropriate, have made discreet arrangements to exploit these.

16 July 2015