



House of Commons  
Defence Committee

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# **Flexible response? An SDSR checklist of potential threats and vulnerabilities**

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**First Report of Session 2015–16**





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**First Report of Session 2015–16**

*Report, together with formal minutes  
relating to the report*

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## Summary

This Report provides a checklist of 11 potential threats and general vulnerabilities which ought to be addressed in the imminent Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).

We believe that the Government's "tiered" approach to mapping the threat picture—soon to be set out in the National Security Strategy—is flawed in assuming that the probability of potential threats becoming actual ones can reliably be predicted. Greater emphasis should be laid upon military flexibility: the ability of versatile Armed Forces to cope with what cannot reliably be foretold. Consequently, our checklist does not pretend to prioritise the credible potential threats and vulnerabilities we have listed.

We intend to evaluate the SDSR against our checklist to see if it provides an adequate structure for the Armed Forces to cope with and counter each of these threats if it actually emerges between now and the next Defence Review.

### Checklist of potential threats and vulnerabilities

#### *Potential threat areas*

- Cyber-attack and espionage
- Growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa
- Increases in extremism, radicalisation and other enablers of terrorist activity
- Non-state actors and hybrid warfare undermining the international rules-based order
- Potential for conflict in the South and East China Seas
- Potential for Russian aggression in Europe and the High North and possible dilution of the commitment to Article 5

#### *General vulnerabilities*

- Economic dependence on unreliable partners
- Inability to react to sub-conventional threats
- Inadequate training opportunities for UK Armed Forces
- Lack of numbers in UK Armed Forces and gaps in capabilities
- Lack of expertise in Whitehall





# 1 Introduction

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1. In the 2010 SDSR, the Government pledged to undertake such a Review every five years.<sup>1</sup> In advance of the publication of the 2015 SDSR, we decided to conduct a short inquiry to list credible potential threats and vulnerabilities that the SDSR ought to address. It is not the aim of our inquiry to produce an alternative National Security Strategy (NSS) or SDSR. Nor are we in a position to produce a comprehensive list of every conceivable threat. Instead, we have selected those that the SDSR should take into account when making recommendations for the size and structure of UK Armed Forces.

2. No attempt has been made to rank these credible potential threats by probability of them actually transpiring. We were impressed by the argument and conclusions of Dr Christopher Tuck and Dr Deborah Sanders of King's College London that:

History suggests that the futures that we predict most confidently are those that are probably least likely to emerge [...] the whole chaotic interplay between global cause and effect may create huge change from small developments, and small developments from what we presume to be huge changes. Colin S. Gray puts this bluntly: 'we know nothing, literally zero, for certain about the wars of the future, even in the near-term' [...] our best bet to meet the future is to focus our efforts on increasing the flexibility of our Armed Forces to adapt, rather than chaining them to a contestable, and likely mistaken model of the future.<sup>2</sup>

We take the view that the 3 risk-based tiers underlying the NSS are inherently unhelpful. Even if one may have some confidence in placing high-impact threats with high probability in Tier 1, and low-impact threats with low probability in Tier 3, the placing of very high-impact threats—like war between states—with (supposedly) low probability only in Tier 2 can be distinctly misleading.

3. We have identified 11 credible potential threats and vulnerabilities in this Report. The checklist is set out in the Summary with the underlying argument contained in the second and third sections. While our Report concentrates primarily on the UK's defence capabilities, it is clear that the UK will continue to rely on its membership of NATO—and on NATO allies—in order to supplement those capabilities.

4. We received a number of memoranda as written evidence and held three oral evidence sessions. We thank all of those who contributed to this inquiry.

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1 HM Government, [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), CM 7948, October 2010, p 9

2 [CPT0008](#), itself citing Colin S. Gray, 'War—Continuity in Change, and Change in Continuity', *Parameters* (Summer 2010), 5

## 2 Potential threat areas

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### Introduction

5. In this section we consider the six potential threats which the MoD must address in the SDR. Given their unpredictability, we have deliberately not ranked them in order of priority. Instead, they are listed alphabetically.

### Cyber-attack and espionage

6. Hostile attacks upon the UK by other states and large-scale cyber-crime were listed in the last National Security Strategy as a Tier 1 threat. Evidence to our inquiry has made clear that the threat has not decreased in the subsequent five years.

7. Nigel Inkster, Director of Future Conflict and Cyber Security, International Institute for Strategic Studies, told us that the UK was now dependent on information communications technology in every facet of everyday life, and as such was open to a wide variety of threats. He explained that threats from cyber could vary greatly in terms of severity, impact and intention.<sup>3</sup> The Royal Society went further and suggested that cyber had now become a “domain” of battle, alongside land, maritime and air.<sup>4</sup>

8. Cyber-attacks and espionage are relatively inexpensive to carry out, when compared to the cost of using conventional military hardware.<sup>5</sup> Attribution can be difficult to prove and cyber operations can be mounted both by states and non-state actors, with targets ranging from governments to corporations and individuals. Several witnesses noted that cyber-attacks might be used in concert with other capabilities rather than as a standalone technique.<sup>6</sup> The result is a spectrum of threats from Chinese state-sponsored industrial espionage (such as the alleged theft of aircraft designs for the F35<sup>7</sup>), to alleged Russian attacks upon the internet services of other states (e.g., Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014), to low-level cyber-attacks carried out by DAESH (such as the hacking of the Twitter feed and YouTube Channel of US CENTCOM).<sup>8</sup>

9. According to Jim Lewis, Director and Senior Fellow of the Technology and Public Policy Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the perpetrators of cyber-attacks will often have a higher tolerance of risk and less vulnerability to a retaliatory attack than their targets, making a credible and proportional deterrent threat harder to establish.<sup>9</sup> Peter Roberts, Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), agreed. He told us that cyber threats will need to be countered, not just with conventional responses, but also by using political or economic tools.<sup>10</sup> This position was supported by Edward Schwarck, Research Fellow, Asia Studies at RUSI, who emphasised the importance of UK cyber resilience in deterring cyber-threats:

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3 [Q2](#)

4 [CPT0022](#)

5 Infosec Institute, [The Rise of Cyber Weapons and Relative Impact on Cyberspace](#)

6 [Q3](#)

7 CNN, [China denies suggestions it stole designs for new U.S. fighter](#), 20 January 2015

8 Voice of America, [FBI Investigating Cyber Attack on US Central Command](#), 12 January 2015

9 Stimson, [Jim Lewis of CSIS speaks at Stimson on Cyber Deterrence](#), 15 November 2012

10 [Q96](#)

It is important to make the point that deterrence is not only about punishment. You can also have deterrence by denial. In the case of the threat posed by China, that would primarily come in the form of hardening our IT infrastructure—making it more secure and improving the cyber-knowhow of the UK commercial sector. I think measures like these would make the UK a much less desirable target, as China would see it, for cyber-espionage. Here one might use the analogy of a burglar considering which house to rob on a street. The house with strong locks and sophisticated alarms is much less likely to be targeted than the one without. I think the UK should be focusing most of its efforts here.<sup>11</sup>

10. The importance of the threat of cyber-attack has been highlighted by the fact that responsibility for it was recently transferred to the Ministry of Defence.<sup>12</sup>

**11. It is clear that potential cyber-attacks pose a serious threat to UK security. They could be mounted by a wide range of state and non-state actors. Therefore, we expect cyber resilience—alongside offensive and defensive capabilities—to be a key feature of the SDSR.**

### Growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa

12. In 2010, the National Security Strategy identified “major instability, insurgency or civil war overseas which creates an environment that terrorists can exploit to threaten the UK” as a Tier 2 threat.<sup>13</sup> In the subsequent five years, the Middle East and North African regions have seen the emergence (or re-emergence) of four war zones—in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Both regions also suffer from wider areas of instability with a number of countries still recovering or adapting to events which took place as part of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Of particular relevance are current events in North Africa where Islamist groups controlling areas in Egypt and Libya have now sworn allegiance to DAESH. Both the US 2015 National Security Strategy and the MoD’s *Global Strategic Trends—Out to 2045* highlight the area as being at risk of growing instability resulting from “religious extremism, rejection of democratic reforms, a decline in natural energy resources and the effects of climate change”.<sup>14</sup>

13. Dr Alia Brahim, Visiting Fellow at the Oxford University Changing Character of War Programme, told us that although she considered DAESH to be the principal threat emanating from the region, poor governance and the spread of armed conflict were the key drivers of terrorism there.<sup>15</sup> She suggested that armed conflict was being used as a tactic to delay reform and political evolution and that this could result in even greater instability. Dr Brahim stressed that the UK lacked capacity to counter this threat:

11 [Q96](#)

12 HC Deb, 19 Oct 2015, [Col. 650](#)

13 HM Government, [A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy](#), CM 7953, October 2010, p 27

14 Ministry of Defence, [Global Strategic Trends - Out to 2045](#), June 2014, p 125; White House, [National Security Strategy](#), February 2015, p 5

15 [Q61](#)

Currently we have no fully functioning and effective counter-terrorism partner in the Middle East and North Africa [and] the internal stability of the UK's allies is more precarious at a time when the threat from terrorism is rising.<sup>16</sup>

14. In written evidence Professor Rosemary Hollis from City University, London also highlighted the difficulty of identifying allies in the region with whom we could work:

Herein lies the conundrum for European governments, the British included. Prior to the Arab uprisings, which began in December 2010, both their counter-terrorism strategies and migration controls were operated with the cooperation of dictatorial regimes, the very regimes challenged by their populations in the uprisings. Such cooperation continues or has been resumed with the governments of Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Jordan, as well as with the Arab Gulf states. The problem derives from the failed states, notably Libya and Syria. The message implicit here is that dictators, or rather those prepared to do deals with Britain and other European states on controlling migration and countering terrorism, are preferable to failed states and chaos.<sup>17</sup>

15. Jon Marks, Chairman of Cross-border Information Ltd, noted that even those countries which managed to retain stability after the Arab uprisings still had a number of unresolved issues that were likely to be brought to the fore through the process of political succession. In Algeria, for example, the recent arrest of senior military figures together with terrorist activity and inter-ethnic fighting raised concerns about the potential instability which could arise upon the succession process for the Presidency. Mr Marks told us that:

What we have seen across the region is that while we are all focused on one conflict, there is room for another. [...] Succession in several countries could trigger political disputes, and there are conflicts, such as that in Western Sahara, that people have not looked at. People did not look at the Tuareg uprisings and the problems that flared up into Mali and led to the projection of European forces, including British support. So there is plenty of that and with the influence of climate change being felt on the rise of Boko Haram, for example, there is plenty to worry about.<sup>18</sup>

16. The growing instability in the Middle East and North African region is a significant threat to the UK and its interests. The increased threat of international terrorism was brought into stark relief by the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 and represents a very real danger to the UK. The civil wars in Libya and Syria are also the cause of mass refugee movements into neighbouring countries and the European Union and the subsequent strain that such migration places on natural resources and state infrastructure is severe.

**17. The SDSR will have to address the threats arising from the growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa. In particular, it will need to demonstrate that the UK will have the capability to recognise both the existing and emerging threats from these areas, and the capacity to formulate a coherent strategy to counter them both at home and abroad.**

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16 [Q62](#)

17 [CPT0006](#)

18 [Q63](#)

## Increases in extremism, radicalisation and other enablers of terrorist activity

18. In evidence to this inquiry, Dr Alia Brahimi suggested that as well as the drivers of terrorism being present in the Middle East and North Africa, so too were the enablers—spaces, weapons, money and ideas.<sup>19</sup> She observed that the millenarian tendencies of the leadership of DAESH made it more dangerous than previous incarnations, particularly in its choice of weaponry.<sup>20</sup> However, Jon Marks cautioned against an over-concentration on that specific terrorist group. He argued that, while radical Islamism may remain the dominant ideology and threat over the next five years, it had the capacity and potential to evolve still further. Thus, the threat in future might not be DAESH but a different incarnation.<sup>21</sup>

19. Mr Marks also warned that radicalisation in the region did not result solely from religion: poor governance in the Middle East had resulted in people becoming radicalised “both in an economic and social sense, as well as in an Islamist sense”.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Dr Brahimi noted, the rise of sectarianism was leading to an increase in the number of proxy armies and non-state actors engaging in conflicts. As an example, she argued that the Saudi/Iranian relationship was “a political rather than doctrinal axis, which recommends non-state actors as a way of projecting that conflict”.<sup>23</sup>

20. The freedom of movement afforded to terrorist groups in North Africa has often been assisted by porous borders in the region. In Libya, the death of Colonel Gaddafi and the subsequent fighting between factions has led to an outflow of heavy weaponry across the whole of North Africa. Illegal trafficking in the local economy remains significant but has evolved in recent years from cigarette smuggling to the smuggling of arms and people.<sup>24</sup> In many cases, traffickers have also adopted a terrorist ideology meaning that the activities of traffickers and terrorists are now mutually supportive.<sup>25</sup>

21. The numbers of terrorist attacks on foreign interests in North Africa have increased in recent years, with the attack on the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria in 2013, the July 2015 murder of tourists on a beach in Sousse in Tunisia, and the apparent sabotage of the Russian Metrojet flight from Sharm el Sheikh to St Petersburg on 31 October 2015, being notable examples. Jon Marks told us it was clear that “the spread of the groups that have joined up with the IS franchise in Libya”, demonstrated the expansion of extremism and terrorism activity over “a larger and larger territorial piece of land”. He added that:

In North Africa as well you have the potential for there to be a real governed space, rather than an ungoverned space; you may not like who is governing it, but the fact is that it is still there in North Africa, just as we have had in Syria/Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

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19 [Q72](#)

20 [Q62](#)

21 [Q63](#)

22 [Q67](#)

23 [Q68](#)

24 [Q66](#)

25 U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2014, [Middle East and North Africa Overview](#), April 2015

26 [Q67](#)

22. Although this inquiry received evidence only on the growing threat of extremism and radicalisation in the Middle East and North Africa, it is important to note that the previous five years have also seen indications of other varieties of extremism. The 2011 attacks carried out by Anders Brevik and the October 2015 attack on Kronan school in Sweden demonstrate the continuing issue of far-right extremism. Closer to home, the Northern Ireland Secretary Rt Hon Theresa Villiers MP confirmed to the House that:

All the main paramilitary groups operating during the troubles are still in existence, including the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Red Hand Commando, the Ulster Defence Association, the Provisional IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst examples of European extremism may not present the same scale of threat as the other enablers of terrorism referred to earlier, they remain matters which the SDSR will need to consider. The SDSR must also address the threat exemplified by recent attacks in Paris of insurgents seeking to use terrorist attacks on our streets to weaken our resolve and to bring conflicts being played out in the Middle East into the UK.

**23. Increases in extremism and radicalisation are allowing terrorist groups to expand both their capabilities and the geographical areas where they can operate. This clearly represents a major threat to the UK and its interests. The SDSR must determine how the UK is to respond, particularly in terms of countering any further evolution of the threat posed by international terrorism and its underlying doctrine. We expect clear roles to be assigned to the Armed Forces in response to this threat, and to see evidence of appropriate adaptation of their capabilities and organisation as distinct from those of the civilian police, anti-terrorist police and the security services.**

### **Non-state actors and hybrid warfare undermining the international rules-based order**

24. The engagement of non-state actors and hybrid warfare (the use of both conventional and asymmetric tactics by state and non-state actors alike), whilst not new, have recently become more prevalent. *Global Strategic Trends—Out to 2045* gave the following assessment of this threat:

Globalisation, in particular the spread of technology, information and ideas, is likely to give an increasing number of people (both state and non-state actors) access to sophisticated and technologically advanced capabilities. This is likely to increase the opportunity for unconventional attacks on technologically sophisticated nations, including by terrorists.<sup>28</sup>

25. Professor Malcolm Chalmers, Research Director and Director of UK Defence Policy Studies at RUSI, reinforced this view:

In relation to both terrorism and other sub-conventional threats, those challenges are often arising precisely because of western conventional superiority. Our potential adversaries do not want to take on the United States in particular or US-led alliances at the conventional level, because they know

<sup>27</sup> HC Deb, 20 Oct 2015, [Col. 830](#)

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Defence, [Global Strategic Trends - Out to 2045](#), June 2014, p 95

they will lose. They therefore try sub-conventional or, in some cases, as with Putin's declaratory policy over the past year and a bit, raising the spectre of nuclear escalation, which, again, is a response to NATO's conventional superiority.<sup>29</sup>

26. ADS, the umbrella body for the defence industry, suggested that the faster proliferation of technology and the fragmentation of unitary, sovereign states would result in additional security threats to the UK and its interests. ADS went on to state that this could also result in threats which were "increasingly asymmetric in nature"; and therefore, future conflicts would be "less predictable".<sup>30</sup>

27. The conflicts in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Ukraine all feature non-state actors, including proxy armies backed by states. Dr Alia Brahimi noted that the lack of friendly state forces on the ground, had led to non-state actors playing a key role in the fight against DAESH. In that respect she highlighted the role of the YPG, the Kurdish militia groups in Syria, the role of the Iranian-backed popular mobilisation units in the recapture of Tikrit in Iraq and Hezbollah pushing back DAESH from Qalamoun in Lebanon. Dr Brahimi concluded that "increasingly, non-state actors are probably going to come to define themselves as counter-terrorism partners, for better or worse".<sup>31</sup>

28. Jon Marks warned that the role played by non-state actors had the potential to undermine the international rules-based order upon which the UK places a high value. While noting the benefits of working with the Kurdish Peshmerga he questioned whether: "building policy around working with a large number of private armies" was desirable.<sup>32</sup> He continued:

That comes back to the degree to which we are looking to make policy that will still depend on the state and the international order we have had since the end of the second world war, or whether there will be a recognition that there is a change. [...] Playing with proxies is a very dangerous game.<sup>33</sup>

29. The utilisation of non-state actors in these conflicts contributes to the complexity of the conflicts—in that a political, as well as a military solution, was required. Dr Brahimi highlighted the difficulty that international organisations, such as the UN, faced in trying to resolve these sorts of crises:

For the UN, it is going to be harder to deal with chapter VII threats under international peace and security in the conventional way. Because these bodies fracture and then split conflicts into very small pieces, the UN, as León has demonstrated with Libya, has a role to play in bringing all those disparate actors together. If that is successful—I would not hold my breath—it could present a model of sorts.<sup>34</sup>

30. The French have suggested that one option may be the voluntary commitment of the P5 members not to veto resolutions which are designed to halt mass atrocities. However,

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29 [Q14](#)

30 [CPT0012](#)

31 [Q68](#)

32 [Q69](#)

33 [Q69](#)

34 [Q69](#)

given the reluctance on the part of the Russian, Chinese and US Governments, this is unlikely to solve the current credibility issue.<sup>35</sup>

31. The international rules-based order is also facing a serious challenge from the use of sub-conventional tactics, particularly on the part of Russia. Examples include the alleged use of offensive cyber capabilities and provocative actions against NATO countries.

32. The Russian use of cyber warfare against opponents has been well demonstrated over the past decade. Cyber-attacks against banking systems, power distribution networks, government sites and even the internet infrastructure were the hallmarks of Russian-attributed (but denied) attacks in Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008. More recently, the 2015 cyber-attacks against TV5 Monde in France (disguised as a cyber-attack by an Islamic group) and an attack against several German Government sites, as well as the Lower Parliament of the German Bundestag,<sup>36</sup> prior to a visit by the Ukrainian Prime Minister, were attributed to Russia. Again, Russian officials denied responsibility for the attacks and in both cases, Russia-based groups (rather than the Russian state) have been blamed. However, there have been strong suggestions that several Russian groups responsible for cyber-attacks do have links to the Russian Government.<sup>37</sup>

33. Russian provocative actions, intended to undermine NATO, have included Russian military aircraft entering the airspace of member countries prompting interception by those countries' Air Forces.<sup>38</sup> The RAF has also intercepted Russian military flights which have come close to UK airspace.<sup>39</sup> The recent sighting of a suspected Russian submarine in UK waters required the engagement of maritime patrol aircraft—a key deficiency in the UK national armoury—from France, America and Canada.<sup>40</sup>

34. There has also been evidence of hybrid warfare both in the annexation of Crimea and especially in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Professor Chalmers suggested that while our awareness of the sub-conventional threat has increased as a result of Russian actions in Ukraine, the difficulty lay in devising an acceptable response to it:

It is not credible to respond to small-scale subversion or cyber threats by deploying a NATO division. That is just not going to be credible, so you have to have something that tackles that edge.<sup>41</sup>

Nigel Inkster also highlighted the particular difficulty of responding in the case of a cyber-attack:

In the cyber domain in particular there is the problem that there are no agreed definitions of what equates to an armed attack or a use of force as defined in the UN charter, so devising an acceptable response is quite challenging. If a cyber-attack generates physical damage or deaths then that might be a rather different story, but most of the time such attacks do not.<sup>42</sup>

35 Al Jazeera America, [An unlikely push for Security Council members to give up their veto power](#), 24 September 2014

36 The Telegraph, [Russian hackers accused of attacks on Bundestag and French TV Producer](#), 11 June 2015

37 FireEye, [APT28: A Window into Russia's Cyber Espionage Operations?](#), 27 October 2014

38 The Telegraph, [RAF Typhoons scramble to long-range Russian bombers](#), 19 September 2014

39 BBC News, [RAF jets intercept Russian planes near UK airspace](#), 14 April 2015

40 The Telegraph, [Britain forced to ask NATO to track Russian submarine in Scottish waters](#), 9 December 2014

41 [Q14](#)

42 [Q14](#)



35. The difficulty posed by the use of hybrid warfare therefore lies not in its effect but rather in devising an adequate response to it—both as an individual state and as part of the network of international organisations, such as NATO or the UN. In his written evidence to this inquiry, Lt General (ret'd) Sir Paul Newton, Professor of Strategy and Director of the Strategy and Security Institute at Exeter University emphasised that:

The MOD's assessment of the Future Character of Conflict (FCOC, 2009) introduced the notion of 'hybrid' threats; a toxic cocktail of traditional and novel risks, manifesting concurrently. However, Whitehall seems to view hybrid threats mainly through the prism of a 'rules based' international system made up of at least semi-functioning states, when the reality is of an increasingly disorderly neighbourhood where the 'unthinkable' is already happening.<sup>43</sup>

**36. In the face of unorthodox and irregular forces operating deniably and in defiance of normal international relations, the SDR must signal an intention to develop doctrines for unconventional responses, including the use of counter-propaganda to expose the hidden links of covert aggression.**

### Potential for conflict in the South and East China Seas

37. The UK presence in the Far East is limited and there have been no British military bases in the Asia-Pacific since the decision to retreat from 'east of Suez' in 1968. Our presence is now limited to a large fuel depot and berthing dockyards in the Sembawang port in Singapore and a Gurkha garrison stationed in Brunei. UK defence activity is now concentrated in the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) between the UK, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. These arrangements have, in the near past, resulted in exercises to counter security threats in the southern South China Sea.<sup>44</sup>

38. Despite the UK's low level presence in the region, our witnesses highlighted a number of threats to UK interests. In oral evidence, Edward Schwarck told us that these included threats to the integrity of maritime law, regional stability, nuclear non-proliferation and the non-use of coercion or force among states.<sup>45</sup> Professor Andrew Dorman, King's College London, argued that if the UK wanted to project a global presence then it would need to engage with such threats.<sup>46</sup>

39. The role of UK allies in the region makes this area still more significant. Following the recent voyage by USS *Lassen* within 12 nautical miles of the coast of a Chinese artificial island—which China claims as part of its Exclusive Economic Zone—the Australian Defence Minister released a statement highlighting support for the rights of freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight:

Australia has a legitimate interest in the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, unimpeded trade and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.<sup>47</sup>

43 [CPT0017](#)

44 Australian Government, Department of Defence, [Exercise Bersama Lima concludes](#), 23 October 2014

45 [Q96](#)

46 [Q17](#)

47 [News.com.au, Tricky diplomacy for Australia in South China Sea impasse](#), 30 October 2015

40. Australia is currently debating whether its Navy ought to follow the US example and also enter the disputed areas. Earlier this year, the UK Foreign Secretary highlighted the large amount of trade which passes through the South China Sea and suggested that the UK would be prepared to deploy Armed Forces as part of the FPDA should its interests and alliances in the region be put at risk by regional security challenges.<sup>48</sup> However, both Peter Roberts and Edward Schwarck highlighted the lack of UK maritime capabilities as a barrier to significant engagement in the Pacific. Peter Roberts told us that for the SDSR to address these threats, a priority of the SDSR would need to be “destroyers, frigates, submarines—particularly nuclear submarines—and re-supply vessels” along with maritime patrol aircraft and SIGINT capability platforms.<sup>49</sup> Edward Schwarck told us that recent reductions in platforms such as destroyers, helicopter carriers and the removal of maritime patrol aircraft had already hindered the UK’s ability to contribute meaningfully to military exercises, whether alongside US in the “Rim of the Pacific” or in the annual exercises that come as part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements.<sup>50</sup>

**41. We support the UK Government’s position that territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas should be settled according to international rules. However, the UK may not be able to rely upon this in the future. We will therefore measure the provision of maritime capabilities in the SDSR against the potential to deploy to a number of areas, including the Pacific.**

## Potential for Russian aggression in Europe and the High North and possible dilution of the commitment to Article 5

42. Russia’s military capability has been substantially strengthened in recent years. The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Defence recently warned that Russia was now operating in greater unison, with increased military readiness, mobility and range.<sup>51</sup> Russian defence spending has steadily increased; from 3.15% of GDP in 2013 (US \$66.1 billion) to nearly 3.5% (US \$70 billion) in 2014. In 2015 it has witnessed a further increase on the 2014 budget of 8.1 %, to total US \$84.5 billion.<sup>52</sup>

43. This ‘resurgence’ has already brought Russia back to the point where it possesses the capabilities to threaten the territorial integrity of NATO, and directly to coerce the UK itself by various means.<sup>53</sup> The potential threats posed by Russia to the security of the UK and its interests are multi-faceted. Dr Igor Sutyagin of RUSI provided us with the following stark assessment of the Russian military:

The Russian forces are being rapidly modernised now. They have reached the end of the research and development cycle, so now they are re-arming, and, what is also interesting, they are learning in a very effective and fast way. Also, there is a combination of soft and hard kill. Their staff culture is very high. They understand how to plan situations and how to play around international law.

48 IHS Jane’s 360, [UK prepared to deploy military assets to support FPDA in event of future Asia-Pacific crises, says foreign secretary](#), 2 February 2015

49 [Q95](#)

50 [Q95](#)

51 The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Defence, [The Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy: Unified Effort](#), June 2015

52 International Institute of Strategic Studies, [The Military Balance – Chapter 5: Russia and Eurasia](#), February 2015; Bloomberg Politics, [‘China, Russia, Saudi Arabia Boosted Defense Most as U.S. Cut’](#), April 12 2015

53 [CPT0017](#)

In Ukraine, for instance, they managed to deploy a huge number of troops—up to 91,000 to 100,000—near the Ukrainian border without violating a single letter of the Vienna document. They never exceeded the 8,000 or 9,000 troops limit that is established as the limit for exercises. They managed to locate and control them in a way that is effective, but absolutely permissible. That is another strong aspect on the Russian side.<sup>54</sup>

44. Russian military doctrine has interpreted further expansion of NATO along Russia's borders, and the attempt to secure a global role for the alliance, as military threats to Russia. Furthermore, a recent amendment to the doctrine—ratified by President Putin in December 2014—cited as a threat, any military activity close to Russia's borders. The implication is that any defensive action by NATO could fall into the category of a 'threat'.<sup>55</sup>

45. In written evidence, Jonathan Eyal from RUSI suggested that while current Russian antagonism could be considered opportunistic:

Broad hostility to the West will be unrelenting, and will involve a mixture of dangling economic carrots while brandishing military sticks of the kind observable now in Ukraine, and in Syria.<sup>56</sup>

46. A further concern is the Russian doctrine of protecting its 'citizens' against what it views as repression in other countries. It was this doctrine which Russia used to "legitimise" its incursions in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea last year. Russia recently announced that "whole segments of the Russian world" may need Russia's protection.<sup>57</sup> Such a trend highlights the vulnerability of the three Baltic States, all of which have significant Russian minority populations. The use of 'little green men' (a term used to describe soldiers or uniformed 'volunteers' who operate without insignia or official affiliation but, in this case, are thought to be Russian Special Forces) in Crimea and Ukraine has highlighted the difficulty in securing a political consensus on whether an armed attack is being carried out by another state (which would invoke Article 5 if the state attacked were a NATO member) or whether it is simply a local uprising and therefore not subject to the same security guarantee.

47. Russia's use of sub-conventional tactics and deniable actions have raised concerns about the possible dilution of Article 5. Professor Chalmers, Professor Dorman and Nigel Inkster each highlighted the difficulty of countering such actions in a credible and proportionate way. Professor Dorman noted that Article 5 did not contain a legal requirement for other States to engage and did not state what constituted an armed attack. He argued that this left it subject to the interpretation of individual NATO members.<sup>58</sup> Nigel Inkster raised the concern that low-level subversive tactics could irreparably damage the credibility of Article 5 if not dealt with in a credible manner.<sup>59</sup>

48. Dr Sutyagin went further:

If you destroy the credibility of NATO, that dissolves NATO as a whole, which means that you lose—that is exactly the divide and rule which we started with.

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54 [Q84](#)

55 The Financial Times, [New Putin doctrine emphasises threat of political destabilisation](#), 26 December 2014

56 [CPT0024](#)

57 Reuters, [Disquiet in Baltics over Sympathies of Russian Speakers](#), 24 March 2014

58 [Q14](#)

59 [Q14](#)

That is how sub-Article 5 actions might lead to the destruction of the structure which is supposed to provide your defence and security via Article 5. That is why you should be concerned.<sup>60</sup>

However, Jonathan Eyal suggested that Russian policy was not to destroy NATO but to “defang” it by:

Discrediting the significance of NATO’s famed Article 5 security guarantee to its member-states through the engineering of a series of small crises which, each one when taken alone does not merit NATO’s military reaction, but when taken together put NATO in an unflattering light and raise doubts about the applicability of Article 5 security guarantees.<sup>61</sup>

49. Our predecessor Committee considered the difficulty of NATO responding to sub-conventional (or asymmetric) warfare and concluded that neither the UK nor NATO had satisfactory doctrine or capabilities to address such threats. In response to the Report, the then Government said:

At the Summit, Allied leaders agreed to ensure that NATO is able effectively to address “the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats, where a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design”. This will now be taken forward in conjunction with work to improve NATO’s responsiveness through the Readiness Action Plan (RAP). The Defence Secretary also hosted a discussion with Defence Ministers at the Summit to explore the issues of Hybrid warfare which focused on where Hybrid warfare falls between Articles IV and V, in addition to how the Alliance could respond.<sup>62</sup>

50. Another sub-conventional threat from Russia is its apparent focus on the potential to disrupt the sea lines of communication which allow the US to communicate with continental Europe. This threat was raised by both Dr Sutyagin<sup>63</sup> and Dr David Blagden of Exeter University in his written evidence. They argued that Russian submarines were looking to exploit the increasingly vulnerable sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) which are vital to the UK, as a trade-dependent power.<sup>64</sup>

51. This threat has also been highlighted by US officials who have declared that Russia has been undertaking operations to assess the feasibility of interrupting the trans-Atlantic SLOCs which carry data between the US and European continent. The New York Times recently reported that Russian submarine activity along the route that the cables take has increased by 50% over the last year. These cables carry global business worth more than \$10 trillion a day, and more than 95 percent of daily communications. The New York Times article cited Admiral Mark Ferguson as arguing that Russia’s emerging doctrine involved the use of space, cyber, information warfare and hybrid warfare designed to cripple the decision-making process of NATO.<sup>65</sup>

60 [Q101](#)

61 [CPT0024](#)

62 Defence Committee, [Ninth Special Report of Session 2014-15, Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part Two- NATO: Government Response to the Committee’s Third Report of Session 2014-15, HC 755, para 4](#)

63 RUSI Defence Systems, [Russia’s New Maritime Doctrine: Attacking NATO’s Sea Lanes of Communication in the Atlantic – Sustainability, Future Capabilities and Potential Countermeasures](#), , Vol. 17, 28 August 2015

64 [CPT0017](#)

65 The New York Times, [Russian Ships Near Data Cables Are Too Close for U.S. Comfort](#), 25 October 2015

## The High North

52. There are five Arctic Ocean coastal states: Canada, Greenland, Norway, Russia, and the United States. Three other states—Finland, Iceland, and Sweden—have territory above the Arctic Circle, but without Arctic Ocean coastlines. The Arctic has long been considered a potential flashpoint for hostilities between Russia and the West and the Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy in 2015, cited Russia as the “defining factor” of future Norwegian defence planning.<sup>66</sup> That concern has been echoed by Denmark, Sweden and Finland in the form of the recent Nordic military alliance; the main focus of which is to provide a response to Russian military actions in the Baltic.<sup>67</sup>

53. Dr Duncan Depledge, Royal Holloway, University of London, described the UK as having a “low-level physical presence” in the High North which is concentrated in scientific research and military training. As part of this, the UK is an observer to the Arctic Council, in order to support the engagement of British scientists in a number of large-scale Arctic science research programmes run by the Council’s working groups.

54. British military training is run in co-operation with Norway and Canada, with the UK supplying Royal Marine Commandos and other units to train for cold weather operations in Canada and northern Norway. In addition the UK regularly participates in joint military exercises in Arctic waters<sup>68</sup>

55. However, Dr Depledge notes that UK interests in this area are significant:

In 2012, Norway accounted for the supply of more than half (55 per cent) of the UK’s gas and almost half (46 per cent) of its oil imports, thus making it critically important to safeguard supply infrastructure between the UK and Norway from potential attack or disruption (a vital national security interest, as identified in the UK National Security Strategy). As Norway pushes deeper into the Arctic to develop oil and gas reserves that may well provide a proportion of future exports to the UK, the imperative to safeguard supplies will necessarily draw the attention of the defence community deeper into the Arctic as well.<sup>69</sup>

56. At present, Russia continues to participate in the Arctic Council. However, Dr Sutyagin argued that:

The ‘rules of the game’ Russia wrote for its forays into eastern Ukraine are equally applicable in the Arctic. The main one—to keep activities below the response threshold of one’s adversaries—constitutes a guiding principle. It is what has allowed Russia to buzz its Arctic neighbours’ airspace many dozens of times in recent months and to interfere with a Finnish research vessel in international waters in October 2014 without causing diplomatic ruptures or compromising Arctic Council work. It is also the sort of ‘rule’ that Arctic countries, such as Norway, fear could be used to pressure them in future: Russian fishing trawlers in Svalbard’s exclusive economic zone—challenging

66 The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Defence, [The Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defence Policy: Unified Effort](#), June 2015

67 The Guardian, [Nordic countries extend military alliance in face of Russian aggression](#), 10 April 2015

68 Duncan Depledge, *Emerging UK Arctic policy*, *International Affairs* 89: 6, 2013

69 Duncan Depledge, *Emerging UK Arctic policy*, *International Affairs* 89: 6, 2013

Norway's interpretation of the Spitsbergen Treaty—would cause Oslo serious discomfort, but hardly justify a NATO response.<sup>70</sup>

57. Tim Reilly from the Institute of Statecraft believed that should Russia withdraw from the Arctic Council it had the potential to undermine the development of the Northern Sea Route as a new international trade route between the East and West. He believed that this could cause China to review its policy on the High North:

Under such circumstances China may well argue that as the AC's founding mandate of a ban on strategic discussions by AC members is now clearly being challenged by an increasing NATO presence, then the twin guiding AC policies of environmental protection and sustainable development are thus irrelevant too if there is to be no globalization, and that China's original view of the Arctic as "a zone of peace and a global commons for the benefit of all mankind" should be reviewed again. This means that subsequent views on different governance models (NATO/AC), access to resources, and presence in the Arctic would be open to discussion/debate by all-comers.<sup>71</sup>

**58. The resurgence of an expansionist Russia represents a significant change in the threat picture since 2010 and has implications not only for the UK but also for our allies as well. It is therefore essential that the SDSR sets out a policy to help counter this partial reversion to Cold War politics. In particular, NATO's conventional deterrence of Russia must be credible. This is a vital obligation which we will keep under continual review.**

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70 Dr Igor Sutyagin, Arctic Spillover? Russia, the West and Ukraine, RUSI Newsbrief, 26 January 2015

71 [CPT0025](#)

## 3 General vulnerabilities

### Introduction

59. In this section we consider the five general vulnerabilities which the MoD must address in the SDSR. These, again, are listed alphabetically.

### Economic dependence on unreliable partners

60. The 2010 SDSR noted that “our national security depends on our economic security”.<sup>72</sup> Professor Dorman saw significant vulnerabilities in the UK’s critical infrastructure coming from the foreign ownership of UK resources.<sup>73</sup> This was supported by other witnesses who highlighted serious reservations about Chinese investment in UK critical national infrastructure. This investment includes ownership of a third of the Hinkley Point nuclear power plant being built by the French company EDF. The Chinese are also expected to contribute to the development of further nuclear power station projects. Peter Roberts explained his concerns:

This is about the leadership of China, the CCP [Chinese Communist Party], buying British capabilities and infrastructure. As a Parliament, you might decide that that is absolutely acceptable. There are many states where it is acceptable; the threat can be mitigated; and it provides critical capital to provide updates that could in due course be nationalised on a whim. This is unrealistic. We are selling some really, really important bits of Britain, in terms of our infrastructure, our resilience and our ability to operate, and we are selling them to provide short-term income, with some very problematic issues to come in terms of loss of intellectual property, ownership and operating benefits.<sup>74</sup>

**61. Whilst foreign investment in capital projects has a positive impact on the UK economy, such investments may open up vulnerabilities in our infrastructure. The resilience of our critical national infrastructure is vital for UK defence and security and we expect the SDSR robustly to address this potential danger.**

### Inability to react to sub-conventional threats

62. Sub-conventional threats are those which, if carried out, would not obviously reach a threshold justifying an armed response. Several of our witnesses raised concerns about the ability of the UK and NATO to respond to such threats. The use of sub-conventional threats has already been considered in the sections ‘*Non-state actors and hybrid warfare undermining the international rules-based order*’ and ‘*Potential for Russian aggression in Europe and the High North and possible dilution of the commitment to Article 5*’. We do not rehearse the points previously made, but draw attention to the evidence already cited in which Professor Chalmers and Nigel Inkster stressed the difficulty of devising a credible response to sub-conventional threats.<sup>75</sup> We also refer to the evidence of Sir Paul Newton

72 HM Government, [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), CM 7948, October 2010, Foreword

73 [Q4](#)

74 [Q97](#)

75 [Q14](#)

who told us that the UK Government is unable to respond to sub-conventional threats which are employed as part of hybrid warfare. Instead, the UK relies too heavily upon the rules-based international system which is being steadily undermined by sub-conventional threats.<sup>76</sup>

**63. Adequate defence capabilities and Armed Forces are of little use without adequate decision-making and political will. We therefore expect the SDSR to address both the UK Government's and also NATO's inability to react effectively to sub-conventional threats.**

### Inadequate training opportunities for UK Armed Forces

64. Given the unpredictability of threats, witnesses testified that flexibility must be a central component of resilience to threats. Professor Chalmers, in oral evidence, suggested that the test of the SDSR would be the extent to which it managed to “provide capabilities that are relatively flexible and robust against the risks that are more serious from a UK point of view”.<sup>77</sup> He added that:

Any reasonable risk-based assessment of where we stand today would identify a range of risks and a lot of uncertainty. Therefore, given the nature of the risk assessment today, it makes sense to have forces that are flexible and to put a heavy reliance on international partners, because we can address relatively few of those risks by ourselves.<sup>78</sup>

65. As already noted, written evidence submitted by Dr Christopher Tuck and Dr Deborah Sanders strongly recommended that, rather than predicting future conflicts, the priority was to develop the flexibility of UK Armed Forces, in order to ensure that they can cope with and recover from inevitable surprises. The necessary flexibility could be introduced through a hierarchy of concepts, several of which rely on UK Armed Forces undergoing significant training:

*Concepts and doctrine:* the armed forces need to be supported in sustaining an organisational atmosphere that encourages free thinking and a willingness to challenge orthodoxy.

*Organisation and technology:* flexibility is enhanced where military forces have a balance of capabilities, and organisational diversity because this provides a broad range of tools with which to solve problems. But militaries also need redundancy: there is a minimum level of mass required in each capability below which balance ceases to be useful.

*Command and cognition:* military forces are best served by a philosophy of training and command that encourages decentralisation and the exercise of initiative by subordinates.

*Rapid learning:* flexibility is based also on having the structures and processes within the military for the rapid learning and dissemination of lessons.

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<sup>76</sup> [CPT0017](#)

<sup>77</sup> [Q8](#)

<sup>78</sup> [Q23](#)



*Preparation:* Realistic peacetime preparation for the challenges of war are essential if armed forces are to have the resilience to adapt in the chaos of actual combat operations.<sup>79</sup>

66. Professor Andrew Dorman also highlighted training as an important requirement for widening the breadth of skills available to the UK Armed Forces. However, he cautioned that:

In times of financial stringency, the training budget can often be one of the first areas to be cut in order to provide short-term savings and to help offset intended cuts in equipment plans.<sup>80</sup>

According to the National Audit Office, for example, some of the plans to increase the use of simulators while reducing flying hours are driven by cost considerations.<sup>81</sup>

**67. Comprehensive training is vital to the provision of a military which can react to a wide range of threats. The SDSR should emphasise how training for the Armed Forces will be adapted, developed and sustained in the face of the much broader and unpredictable challenges which may confront us. Without an adequate range and quantity of single-service, joint and multinational training, UK Armed Forces may be vulnerable to a rapidly changing threat environment. The MoD will also have to set out its training programme for UK Forces' participation in NATO's Readiness Action Plan and High Readiness Response Force.**

## Lack of numbers in UK Armed Forces and gaps in capabilities

### *Manpower*

68. In November 2013, the Chief of Defence Staff, in his annual address to RUSI, warned that the UK was in danger of becoming a 'hollow-force'. He stated that:

The dawning reality is that, even if we maintain the non-equipment budget in real terms, rising manpower costs raise the prospect of further manpower and activity cuts. Unattended our current course leads to a strategically incoherent force structure: exquisite equipment, but insufficient resources to man that equipment or train on it. This is what the Americans call the spectre of the hollow-force. We are not there yet; but across Defence I would identify the Royal Navy as being perilously close to its critical mass in man-power terms.<sup>82</sup>

69. Our predecessor Committee, highlighted manpower shortages and gaps in capabilities as key vulnerabilities that a future SDSR should address. As part of its inquiry it took evidence from Professor Philip Sabin, Professor of Strategic Studies in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, who told them that to be adaptable, the Armed Forces needed the right personnel. He highlighted his concern at personnel shortages, noting that "kit can be made adaptable, but only by people. If you invest too much in the technology and you lose out on the people, you really are in trouble". The Report noted that

79 [CPT0008](#)

80 Paul Cornish and Andrew M Dorman, Complex security and strategic latency: the UK Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, *International Affairs* 91: 2, 2015

81 National Audit Office, [Military Flying Training](#), HC 81 Session 2015-16, 12 June 2015, p 41

82 [Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture 2013](#)

all three Services had significant shortages in technical trades, with the worst problems in the Royal Navy.<sup>83</sup> The UK National Defence Association also highlighted specialist manpower shortages in all of the Services as a concern in their report on evaluating SDRS 2015.<sup>84</sup>

70. In written evidence to this inquiry, the Army Families Federation warned that retention, as well as recruitment, would likely cause further manpower shortages in the near future. Catherine Spencer, Chief Executive of the AFF, emphasised that:

The most substantial threat to SDRS is the recruitment and retention issues facing the Army. The financial offer to soldiers has declined sharply [...] Figures which we have compiled show that in REAL terms the soldier's salary has declined by a staggering amount due to the unending pay freeze/restraint in the face of increases to accommodation charges, decrease in allowances.<sup>85</sup>

Yet, on 6 November, after that evidence was submitted, the Telegraph online reported that the Chancellor intends to scrap the practice of awarding incremental rises in nominal pay to Service personnel.<sup>86</sup> As well as pay disincentives, infantry recruitment traditionally suffers when the economy is doing well.

### Capabilities

71. As well as manpower shortages, the significant gaps in maritime capability were identified by witnesses as being of particular concern. Edward Schwarck and Peter Roberts drew attention to several such gaps, with special reference to maritime patrol as an area which must be addressed.<sup>87</sup> Written evidence from ADS also raised concerns about the ability of the UK Government to adapt capabilities to a rapidly changing threat picture:

A vibrant domestic industrial base enhances the probability of the armed forces and security services receiving the capabilities required for operations. It also offers government the capacity to rapidly increase production of capabilities, or modify existing capabilities, to meet a specific threat. At the same time, access to onshore industrial capability enhances the UK's ability to gain maximum operational capacity from a particular capability. [...] For example, as fleet sizes and platform performance are constrained by financial pressures, the ability to modify legacy systems and insert appropriate hardware and software becomes ever more important. This flexible capability can only be maintained through a strong domestic industrial base.<sup>88</sup>

83 Defence Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2014–15, [Re-thinking defence to meet new threats](#), HC512, para 141–146

84 UK National Defence Association, [A Guide to Evaluating SDRS 2015](#), October 2015, p 7

85 [CPT0023](#)

86 The Telegraph, [Armed Forces personnel to be denied automatic pay rises as George Osborne looks to make 'efficiency savings'](#), 6 November 2015

87 [Q93](#); [95](#)

88 [CPT0012](#)

72. Both Peter Roberts<sup>89</sup> and Dr Igor Sutyagin cited Russian missile capabilities as an area of concern. According to Dr Sutyagin:

It is absolutely clear that it is much more affordable for politicians to fire a salvo of ballistic missiles than for you to send a squadron of Tornados, risking pilots.<sup>90</sup>

General Barrons also commented on the development of means to destroy distant targets:

We should also register the effect of ballistic missiles, long-range precision fires, and the proliferation of advanced anti-access capability—the means to shoot down aeroplanes and destroy ships at range.<sup>91</sup>

The growth of these technologies will, in time, increasingly undermine some of the assumptions about the UK's ability to deploy forces at strategic distance, and about how to protect both the UK mainland and UK forces deployed abroad.

73. We also note the conclusion drawn by Sir Paul Newton that:

The contemporary threat reality is that proliferation has put technologically-advanced, sophisticated air and maritime access-denial systems in the hands of several potential adversaries. Theatre entry—other than under near-benign circumstances—may no longer be an 'act of war', even for the US.<sup>92</sup>

If correct, this constitutes a significant challenge to the underlying assumptions about force-projection at strategic level which have underpinned much of the UK's political and military thinking since the SDR of 1998.

**74. Unforeseen crises and conflicts are likely to test the adaptability and capability of UK Armed Forces in the future, as in the past. We are particularly concerned that poor recruitment and retention of service personnel will prove an early and dangerous vulnerability to our defence and security, particularly in the context of a growing economy and public-sector pay restraint. We judge this as a high level priority to be addressed in the SDR and expect to see a distinct plan for the successful provision and sustainment of suitable manpower.**

**75. We are also concerned that certain critical capability gaps—military and political vulnerabilities—are addressed, amongst which the provision of maritime patrol and the ability to (re-)generate mass (including the necessary industrial capacity) for different strategic circumstances are paramount.**

**76. We also expect the SDR to chart a course to address the growing threat of long-range and anti-access fires, both in terms of protection of UK territories and deployed forces.**

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89 [Q93](#)

90 [Q84](#)

91 [Q46](#)

92 [CPT0017](#)

## Lack of expertise in Whitehall

77. According to Nigel Inkster, since SDRS 2010, area specialisation and regional knowledge have been lost to the FCO,<sup>93</sup> while Professor Chalmers regretted that Department's reductions in language skills and local knowledge:

Technical intelligence-gathering is all very well, but actually having people from the agencies or from the Foreign Office, whoever it might be, living in societies and understanding what makes societies tick beyond the Ministries in the capital is really important in terms of picking up what is happening.<sup>94</sup>

78. Sir Paul Newton also noted that the Government's ability to "build a more coherent threat picture" was dependent on its capacity to evaluate data and turn it into "timely, usable intelligence and relevant policy options" He warned that expenditure cuts across Whitehall had diminished its capacity to carry out this task.<sup>95</sup> Professor Chalmers suggested that our ability to understand the possible outcomes in both Egypt and Ukraine would have been greatly improved had greater expertise been available.<sup>96</sup> Jon Marks suggested that the analysis of threats, once they were visible, had been "extraordinarily sloppy".<sup>97</sup> Dr Sutyagin also suggested that this lack of understanding made the UK vulnerable:

Politicians and to a large extent the military [in Russia] understand your culture, whereas you do not understand the Russian political and military culture. That is a serious force multiplier on the Russian side.<sup>98</sup>

79. General Sir Nicholas Houghton, the Chief of Defence Staff, conceded that, although he felt it would be unfair to pass comment on the Foreign Office's levels of capability, there were some areas of concern.<sup>99</sup> However, both he and Campbell McCafferty, Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat at the Cabinet Office, suggested that whilst such expertise was no longer available within Government, it could be sourced externally.<sup>100</sup> General Houghton also agreed with the importance of such analytical capability:

In many respects, the experience of operations over the last decade or so has absolutely reinforced the importance of pre-understanding about what it is you are getting into. We should not be disinvesting in our ability to understand the nature of the world in which we might be asked to operate.<sup>101</sup>

80. If the lack of analytical capability to establish a greater understanding of situations as they arise is no longer consistently present within the UK Government, an SDRS based on a generalised threat picture is likely to become outdated in a quite quickly. In their written evidence, Drs Tuck and Sanders suggested that instead of predicting threats (and therefore chaining the Armed Forces to a contestable, and possibly mistaken, model of the future) the priority ought to be on ensuring sufficient flexibility in the UK's Armed Forces to adapt when the unexpected happens. They asserted that "the key to flexibility is the

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93 [Q20;33](#)

94 [Q20](#)

95 [CPT0017](#)

96 [Q20](#)

97 [Q64](#)

98 [Q84](#)

99 [Q50](#)

100 [Q49](#)

101 [Q51](#)

capacity to adapt to the surprise of actual conditions faster than the enemy”.<sup>102</sup> This need for flexibility was also emphasised by Professor Chalmers:

Any reasonable risk-based assessment of where we stand today would identify a range of possible risks and a lot of uncertainty. Therefore, given the nature of the risk assessment today, it makes sense to have forces that are flexible and to put a heavy reliance on international partners, because we can address relatively few of those risks by ourselves.<sup>103</sup>

81. Professor Andrew Dorman criticised the lack of consultation on the part of Government, noting:

There are a lot of academics externally who are generally not consulted, and lots of country and regional experts. A lot of them are outside London. There tends to be in Whitehall a consultation in the London bubble.<sup>104</sup>

More generally a number of our witnesses raised concerns about the way in which assessments, decisions and plans are carried out in the collegiate, business-as-usual atmosphere of Whitehall. Dr Sutyagin highlighted the difference between Russia and the UK in this respect:

I think that the most important capability Russia has that the United Kingdom lacks now is not in terms of weapons systems, but the procedure and the political will to act, because the Russian procedure is more or less vertical. It is a wartime-style command structure, which you completely lack.<sup>105</sup>

82. The lack of analytical capacity available in Whitehall and the need for flexibility underlines the limitation of the rather facile “tiered” approach which underpins the National Security Strategy. When we asked Campbell McCafferty to explain the methodology, he told us:

What we are trying to do with the tiers is provide evidence and context for the decisions that you have to take in a resource-constrained SDSR. While you could take the low likelihood, high impact risks and spend a lot of money on them, it would be for the Government to decide that that was something they wanted to do. [...] What the tiers are trying to do is provide some evidence and context to inform that decision making for Government, so that they can rightly make the decisions as to where they will spend resource.<sup>106</sup>

83. In written evidence, Dr David Blagden cited several deficiencies in the current approach to the NSS. He suggested that employing the methodology presented above relied on having access to information of a high enough quality. He argued that many of the individual threats varied in severity and should those threats happen in conjunction with each other, the severity of the threat could change demonstrably.<sup>107</sup> In oral evidence, General Sir Nicholas Houghton noted the impact of a combination of threats:

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102 [CPT0008](#)

103 [Q23](#)

104 [Q22](#)

105 [Q84](#)

106 [Q47](#)

107 [CPT0017](#)

I can, for example, recall that in the context of the most recent assessment, insufficient emphasis, I felt, was being laid on the ability of the threats to appear in compound form. So you could just look at the isolated threats and think, “That is within levels of tolerance,” but when you looked at the potential linkages and the compound nature of some of them, it would give you a darker picture.<sup>108</sup>

84. Professors Chalmers and Dorman also addressed the tiered approach of the NSS. Professor Chalmers suggested that the current diversity of threats made risk-based assessment an important tool but noted that it should not be allowed to drive capability choices.<sup>109</sup> Yet, that is precisely what has been happening when some very serious potential threats, including a nuclear attack, have been dismissed as being “only in Tier 2”. Professor Dorman suggested that the time-frame for developing capabilities must also be taken in to account noting that, despite the danger of such an attack being placed in Tier 2 in 2010, the UK had still retained its nuclear deterrent:

If you look at where money was actually spent in the last SDSR, it was not all focused on Tier 1. Also, you would not plot a direct correlation between the two as regards money.<sup>110</sup>

85. Given such serious qualifications to the methodology of the tiers in the NSS, it is hard to see them as anything other than a crude and simplistic categorisation of largely unpredictable threats. At the same time, Government Departments have reduced levels of expertise in their own subjects, and “domain competence” in such subjects is no longer required for civil servants applying for many top Whitehall jobs.

**86. The lack of expertise available in Whitehall presents a significant challenge to the UK Government’s ability to assess threats once they arise. As it will always be difficult, if not impossible, to anticipate such threats, then Government must ensure that there is a high degree of flexibility both within the UK Armed Forces and the decision-making machinery of Government. Without such flexibility, we shall lack the ability to counter any number of threats, including those which cannot be foreseen. This need for flexibility exposes the “tiered” approach of the National Security Strategy as an inadequate basis on which to erect a Strategic Defence and Security Review.**

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108 [Q45](#)

109 [Q23](#)

110 [Q26](#)

## 4 Conclusion

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87. In the weeks and months ahead, we intend to evaluate the SDR by reference to the 11 potential threats and vulnerabilities identified in this Report. The SDR must demonstrate adequate awareness of them all, and configure the Armed Forces to provide the flexibility, versatility and ability to expand which are essential for the defence and security of the United Kingdom.

## Conclusions and recommendations

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### Cyber attack and espionage

1. It is clear that potential cyber-attacks pose a serious threat to UK security. They could be mounted by a wide range of state and non-state actors. Therefore, we expect cyber resilience—alongside offensive and defensive capabilities—to be a key feature of the SDSR. (Paragraph 11)

### Growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa

2. The SDSR will have to address the threats arising from the growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa. In particular, it will need to demonstrate that the UK will have the capability to recognise both the existing and emerging threats from these areas, and the capacity to formulate a coherent strategy to counter them both at home and abroad. (Paragraph 17)

### Increases in extremism, radicalisation and other enablers of terrorist activity

3. Increases in extremism and radicalisation are allowing terrorist groups to expand both their capabilities and the geographical areas where they can operate. This clearly represents a major threat to the UK and its interests. The SDSR must determine how the UK is to respond, particularly in terms of countering any further evolution of the threat posed by international terrorism and its underlying doctrine. We expect clear roles to be assigned to the Armed Forces in response to this threat, and to see evidence of appropriate adaptation of their capabilities and organisation as distinct from those of the civilian police, anti-terrorist police and the security services. (Paragraph 23)

### Non-state actors and hybrid warfare undermining the international rules-based order

4. In the face of unorthodox and irregular forces operating deniably and in defiance of normal international relations, the SDSR must signal an intention to develop doctrines for unconventional responses, including the use of counter-propaganda to expose the hidden links of covert aggression. (Paragraph 36)

### Potential for conflict in the South and East China Seas

5. We support the UK Government's position that territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas should be settled according to international rules. However, the UK may not be able to rely upon this in the future. We will therefore measure the provision of maritime capabilities in the SDSR against the potential to deploy to a number of areas, including the Pacific. (Paragraph 41)



## Potential for Russian aggression in Europe and the High North and possible dilution of the commitment to Article 5

6. The resurgence of an expansionist Russia represents a significant change in the threat picture since 2010 and has implications not only for the UK but also for our allies as well. It is therefore essential that the SDSR sets out a policy to help counter this partial reversion to Cold War politics. In particular, NATO's conventional deterrence of Russia must be credible. This is a vital obligation which we will keep under continual review. (Paragraph 58)

## Economic dependence on unreliable partners

7. Whilst foreign investment in capital projects has a positive impact on the UK economy, such investments may open up vulnerabilities in our infrastructure. The resilience of our critical national infrastructure is vital for UK defence and security and we expect the SDSR robustly to address this potential danger. (Paragraph 61)

## Inability to react to sub-conventional threats

8. Adequate defence capabilities and Armed Forces are of little use without adequate decision-making and political will. We therefore expect the SDSR to address both the UK Government's and also NATO's inability to react effectively to sub-conventional threats. (Paragraph 63)

## Inadequate training opportunities for UK Armed Forces

9. Comprehensive training is vital to the provision of a military which can react to a wide range of threats. The SDSR should emphasise how training for the Armed Forces will be adapted, developed and sustained in the face of the much broader and unpredictable challenges which may confront us. Without an adequate range and quantity of single-service, joint and multinational training, UK Armed Forces may be vulnerable to a rapidly changing threat environment. The MoD will also have to set out its training programme for UK Forces' participation in NATO's Readiness Action Plan and High Readiness Response Force. (Paragraph 67)

## Lack of numbers in UK Armed Forces and gaps in capabilities

10. Unforeseen crises and conflicts are likely to test the adaptability and capability of UK Armed Forces in the future, as in the past. We are particularly concerned that poor recruitment and retention of service personnel will prove an early and dangerous vulnerability to our defence and security, particularly in the context of a growing economy and public-sector pay restraint. We judge this as a high level priority to be addressed in the SDSR and expect to see a distinct plan for the successful provision and sustainment of suitable manpower. (Paragraph 74)
11. We are also concerned that certain critical capability gaps—military and political vulnerabilities—are addressed, amongst which the provision of maritime patrol and the ability to (re-)generate mass (including the necessary industrial capacity) for different strategic circumstances are paramount. (Paragraph 75)

12. We also expect the SDSR to chart a course to address the growing threat of long-range and anti-access fires, both in terms of protection of UK territories and deployed forces. (Paragraph 76)

### Lack of expertise in Whitehall

13. The lack of expertise available in Whitehall presents a significant challenge to the UK Government's ability to assess threats once they arise. As it will always be difficult, if not impossible, to anticipate such threats, then Government must ensure that there is a high degree of flexibility both within the UK Armed Forces and the decision-making machinery of Government. Without such flexibility, we shall lack the ability to counter any number of threats, including those which cannot be foreseen. This need for flexibility exposes the "tiered" approach of the National Security Strategy as an inadequate basis on which to erect a Strategic Defence and Security Review. (Paragraph 86)

### Conclusion

14. In the weeks and months ahead, we intend to evaluate the SDSR by reference to the 11 potential threats and vulnerabilities identified in this Report. The SDSR must demonstrate adequate awareness of them all, and configure the Armed Forces to provide the flexibility, versatility and ability to expand which are essential for the defence and security of the United Kingdom. (Paragraph 87)

# Formal Minutes

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**Tuesday 17 November 2015**

Members present:

Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis, in the Chair

Richard Benyon	Ruth Smeeth
Douglas Chapman	Rt Hon John Spellar
Mrs Madeleine Moon	Bob Stewart
Jim Shannon	Phil Wilson

Draft Report (*Flexible response? An SDSR checklist of potential threats and vulnerabilities*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 87 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 24 November at 10.45 am

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry page at [www.parliament.uk/defcom](http://www.parliament.uk/defcom).

### Tuesday 20 October 2015

*Question number*

**Professor Malcolm Chalmers**, Director of Research, Royal United Services Institute, **Nigel Inkster**, Director of Future Conflict and Cyber Security, International Institute for Strategic Studies, and **Professor Andrew Dorman**, Professor of International Security, King's College London

[Q1–34](#)

### Tuesday 27 October 2015

**General Sir Nicholas Houghton**, Chief of the Defence Staff, **General Sir Richard Barrons**, Commander of Joint Forces Command and **Campbell McCafferty**, Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Cabinet Office

[Q35–59](#)

### Tuesday 3 November 2015

**Dr Alia Brahimi**, Visiting Fellow, Oxford University Changing Character of War Programme, and **Jon Marks**, Chairman and Editorial Director, Cross-Border Information Ltd

[Q60–81](#)

**Edward Schwarck**, **Dr Igor Sutyagin**, and **Peter Roberts**, Royal United Services Institute

[Q82–101](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry web page at [www.parliament.uk/defcom](http://www.parliament.uk/defcom). CPT numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 ADS ([CPT0012](#))
- 2 Army Families Federation ([CPT0023](#))
- 3 British Council ([CPT0009](#))
- 4 Campaign Against Arms Trade ([CPT0005](#))
- 5 Chronos Technology Ltd ([CPT0020](#))
- 6 Dr Andrew Futter ([CPT0002](#))
- 7 Dr Andrew Gawthorpe ([CPT0004](#))
- 8 Dr Christopher Tuck ([CPT0008](#))
- 9 Dr Jonathan Eyal ([CPT0024](#))
- 10 Intel Security ([CPT0015](#))
- 11 Maurice Dixon ([CPT0007](#))
- 12 Ministry of Defence ([CPT0021](#))
- 13 Mr. Jie Sheng Li ([CPT0001](#))
- 14 Northampton Business School (University of Northampton) ([CPT0003](#) and [CPT0013](#))
- 15 Professor Beatrice Heuser ([CPT0014](#))
- 16 Professor Rosemary Hollis ([CPT0006](#))
- 17 Strategy and Security Institute ([CPT0017](#))
- 18 The Royal Aeronautical Society ([CPT0019](#))
- 19 The Royal Society ([CPT0022](#))
- 20 Tim Reilly ([CPT0025](#))