



It is part of the British tradition that there are Defence Reviews from time to time, writes John Howe. Recently these have been laid down by law as required every five years. They are needed not only because of changes in the defence and security environment, including the threat, but also because of the persistent gap between on the one hand, plans and aspirations, and on the other budget resources. This creates the need, quite apart from any political change in government priorities, or external change, to align from time to time the demand and the supply sides of the equation.

There have been several key UK government publications and announcements this Spring on defence and security: the report on the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy; the UK White Paper on Defence; a paper on Defence and Security Industrial Strategy; a very positive budgetary settlement for defence; and a statement on the UK's plans for recovery post COVID.

This time the Integrated Review – interestingly for once it is integrated, as its title suggests - has been particularly significant by reason of the changes in the international and threat environment and the transition to a post Brexit, post Covid world. Of course, for all its claims to strategic rigour, the review is subject to the risk that all previous reviews have faced of being overtaken by unexpected events and by inflation in the costs of defence programmes. But the commitment to increased resources for defence is very significant and although as the UK picks up the costs of the Covid crisis and puts the public finances in order for the long term there will be great pressures on government spending, in foreseeable political circumstances the spending settlement for defence is likely to last, provided the "bargain" described below with the Ministry of Defence is kept.

A prominent feature of the new UK strategy is the emphasis that is placed on an integrated approach, not only between defence and wider security including threats not traditionally thought of as military such as cyber attack and threats from non-state actors, but also in that defence and security are considered in the context of a wide view of the well-being of society including national prosperity and the domestic agenda. "Social Value" is to be taken into account in the evaluation of defence and other government contracts.

There is an emphasis on science and technology and how to harness these. A new research organisation on the lines of the US DARPA is being set up. Technical innovation is not a new theme for the UK: the Ministry of Defence has always been a significant investor in research and technology, and has given much attention in recent years to the balance between industrial and in-house capability and how to harness the innovation that comes from the private sector. But the analogy with DARPA is new and implies that in future MOD will be prepared to invest quite heavily in new concepts before their utility is demonstrated. It will be interesting to see whether this particular approach – which implies a willingness to take risks and write off significant investments if they do not work for defence - will last.

As to external state threats, Russia is seen as the most immediately hostile power, and China as a major strategic rival to the West with whom the management of our relationship is key to our security as well as our prosperity.

The review emphasises the continued and central importance of NATO as the alliance on which UK and more generally western security rests, though it also speaks of the growing importance to security and prosperity of the Far East. The increased emphasis on global security is paralleled by the UK's quest for trading agreements with new partners across the world.

On defence, there is a kind of bargain: a significant increase in resources, but in return the need for the Armed Services to accept quite radical modernisation, that may be uncomfortable in the short term because it brings the necessity, to render it affordable, of giving up some legacy capabilities e.g. in armoured vehicles and some existing naval platforms, and reducing Army numbers. The MOD has to spend its enhanced resources wisely and well, managing costs.

The various papers say very little about European defence as such, though they do emphasise the importance of many relationships and collaborations that the UK has with individual European countries. (Interestingly, France is mentioned more times than is the USA). The present UK Government, which took Britain out of the EU, has not talked up the EU in these

documents. But a much more vivid recognition would have been welcome that the UK, and other nations, can only deal with the international threats that we all face – China, Russia, regional players, non-state actors, pressures from immigration and climate and demographic change – and also deliver on our duty to make the world fairer and better, by working together; and that in defence and security the EU collectively is an entity that is more than the sum of its members and that the UK must recognise it as a very important friend. The fact that the UK has chosen not to be part of the EU must not be allowed by either party to stand in the way of this close identity of purpose in support of our common values and interests.

Even from the perspective of those in the UK who strongly support the EU and deplore Brexit, and who care about European cooperation in defence, many in Britain have been equivocal or negative about the building up of EU competence in defence, particularly if this means transferring responsibility from the nations to the Union, and especially if that competence extends to the ownership and control of forces.

For centuries the UK view has been that the nation remains the entity that can command the obedience, loyalty and self-sacrifice of its armed forces, and economic sacrifice by its citizens. To transfer significant responsibility to the EU level would, in the UK context, not be compatible with public support for sustaining the kind of defence effort that is needed in the common interest. That line of thought becomes stronger as one moves from common support arrangements to the notion of a common operational capability owned and managed at EU level.

In the debates on the future development of the EU's defence capability there is sometimes a suggestion that a common European approach to defence would enable total spending on defence to be reduced. Cooperation and interdependence will produce efficiencies but it would be quite misleading to suggest that European defence "autonomy" can be got on the cheap. For Europe to achieve the full capability to defend itself autonomously – including, in the ultimate, territorial defence against attack, independently of NATO - would be hugely expensive. Those who advocate it perhaps do not believe that it is a capability that is needed in the modern world, that serious military capability on that scale is no longer needed as "a club in the bag". Coupled with that, the argument for full defence autonomy through the EU is sometimes tinged with the suggestion that NATO is no longer necessary and that in the post-Soviet, Trumpean world Europe is neutral as between the power blocs (if that concept still has relevance). All those assumptions are highly questionable. Access to military capability on the scale needed for territorial defence – with the real possibility of use, as a deterrent, even if not actually used – is vital and that in foreseeable circumstances it can only be provided by NATO.

As to the US relationship: during the Trump years it was argued that the US was showing itself to be indifferent (at best) about Europe and we had better make our own arrangements. With the election of President Biden the US has now returned to a position in which it sees itself as part of a world in which allies are essential and there are common values and interests to defend and promote. President Trump was always likely to prove a deviation from the norm of American policy. But as its side of the bargain Europe for its part should recognise that NATO remains essential as the ultimate guarantee of its territorial defence and should pull its weight in that context. The concept of strategic autonomy needs to be approached with care if Europe is not to attenuate the ties that bind the US into the western alliance.

Nevertheless, the Trumpean experience – which possibly may return - is a salutary warning that it cannot be assumed – even by the most fervent Atlanticist – that US and European attitudes are identical and that the US, through NATO, will always be available to provide military support

to Europe in what it sees as regional issues. Hence the importance of European defence cooperation and of European defence capability, in its own right as well as in contribution to a wider Transatlantic Alliance. Hence also the importance of the various EU military deployments around the periphery of Europe. It is a sadness that the British White Papers on Defence and Security make no mention of these operations. It is much to be hoped that ways can be found of the UK supporting them in future, on a case by case basis, and of being brought as appropriate into the mechanisms for planning them.

Leaving the EU does not mean – must not be allowed to mean – that European defence loses its interest to Britain, and that Britain has no contribution to make. Our values and interests – and our convergence on the key issues of international policy – remain very close. The concentration now should be on how best we can work together in the new circumstances. There needs to be a new understanding, a new partnership, between the UK and the EU in defence and security, including the following elements:

- On the British side, the UK should clearly, despite Brexit, embrace the EU as an institution – in a way that transcends its individual members – as a key ally and partner. It is likely to develop its collective role and institutions in defence and the UK should not try to impede that, indeed has no locus to do so.

- An ingredient of that partnership should however be an understanding on the EU side that though the development of the EU's collective competence and of its defence institutions may have a role to play, those things by no means subsume all that is needed for effective defence of Europe. NATO and the alliance with the US – which is based on common values, not simply a transactional relationship – remain key to European defence and security. So does cooperation within Europe at national level, including with non-members of the EU.

- Hopefully there is no serious risk that defence cooperation between individual nations will suffer as a result of Brexit. The current deployment of a Royal Naval aircraft carrier to the Far East is supported by a fleet that includes European participants, and the fleet is exercising with the French Navy en route. A German Navy ship will depart for the South China Sea too. Cooperation with the EU at EU level is a different matter. As noted above, both parties should work towards cooperation, including joint participation on a case by case basis in EU deployments.

- Mechanisms for consultation on foreign and defence policy and on the future development of the CSDP should be pursued, while recognising that on the latter the UK will have no vote or formal locus.

- So should opportunities and mechanisms for British participation in PESCO projects: not, alas, an initiative that the British (in the pre-Brexit atmosphere) have up to now shown as much interest in as they should.

The Brexit negotiations at this point of time still hang heavy over EU-UK relations, with some rancour on both sides. So an agenda for a new partnership on the lines of the above will not readily be delivered. But this is much in the interest of both parties.

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