By I.E. Shields

It is undeniable that the UK is in a financial mess, and it is equally incontestable that the present Government is determined to address the deficit since they believe that this is in the country's long-term interests. This article will challenge neither of these assumptions, but will look at the degree to which the present, and ongoing, Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) is being conducted and ask whether we are in fact sleepwalking into a security disaster?

We do not know what the SDSR is going to conclude and this article is necessarily, therefore, speculative, albeit that it will not try to guess the contents of the Review. But what we do know is that the SDSR is being conducted at break-neck pace, by a very small circle of insiders (despite Government claims that it is inviting outside views: with such a compressed time-line there is insufficient time to undertake proper strategic analysis, let alone take into account external views). The results will be known soon, but we should anticipate little time for debate after the results are published, more likely an unseemly rush to implement what are likely to be hefty cuts.

And herein lies the biggest danger, not the reduction in spending, driven as it is by necessary financial considerations, but the lack of real scrutiny. There are suggestions, if not actual claims, that the Review will be based on, at least in part, a review of where Britain sees her place in the world and therefore (one might expect) how we are both to discharge our global responsibilities, and lever influence, not only to meet our own needs but also to play our part in maintaining the international order. These are lofty and laudable aims, and such a Review is to be supported and applauded. However, within such an ambition lies a potential danger: what if the conclusions are wrong? Now nobody can predict the future with much, let alone total, certainty. But scrutiny is needed for the price of failure – at best Britain's place in the world diminished (with concomitant implications for the national economy), at worse either this country or the way of life and international order to which we adhere under severe threat. No, this is not melodramatic, but a plea that the Review receives due scrutiny. But scrutiny from whom?

There are, I submit, three particular bodies that should scrutinise the SDSR very closely. First, and with the heaviest burden, is Parliament. The first responsibility of Government is to ensure the country's freedom, not just from the threat of invasion in the old-fashioned and crudest sense, but freedom to be able to trade and prosper – hence the importance (for a trading nation such as the UK) of the international order. This is indeed, therefore, a considerable burden on our elected representatives, for it is on their shoulders that the burden of scrutiny to ensure that the answers are indeed the best possible will first fall. If the assumptions on which the (forward-looking and predictive) SDSR is based are false, if the assumptions about defence and security spending are incorrect, and if the country some years hence is thus placed at a disadvantage, the failure of our Parliamentarians to give the SDSR the in-depth and critical examination it requires will have far-reaching consequences. A heavy burden indeed, and one

would hope therefore that Parliament will be afforded ample time to review and consider not only the detail of the SDSR but, more importantly, to consider the assumptions behind it, and the implications for Britain's widest interests following on from it. It will therefore be interesting to see how much time, in terms of preparation, Committee scrutiny and debate, the Government affords what is, by any standard, a critical piece.

If our elected representatives are the first line of examination, then the media – the so-called Fourth Estate – are the second. They have an easier role in some ways since they answer only to their readers, and they can afford to spend more time considering the details. There is, however, a distinct danger in the press' traditional approach: they may be at the mercy of special-interest groups (by which I mean one or other of the branches of the Armed Forces) at a time when we need clear, balanced and long-sighted vision. The role of the Press could, and should, be highly beneficial to the process of reviewing the Review, and it is to be hoped that the editors of all newspapers rise above cheap headlines and concentrate on the long-term issues rather than concentrate on cap-badge type issues. They have the opportunity here to play a significant and needed role if, as history suggests is likely, Parliamentary debate is foreshortened.

The third major contributor, but one that will find it the most difficult to have a clear voice, is the general public. Here local pressures may distort the overall view (more cap-badge centric warfare) and the public may well have greater short-term worries (such as the closure of the local hospital or the impact of major public-sector job cuts in their immediate vicinity) while significant public pressure (unlikely to be seen as defence and security do not generally result in large-scale protests) has not had much success over recent years: neither the estimated one million protestors against the first Gulf War nor the special-interest but hugely-supported pro-Hunting marches deflected Government intent. Nevertheless, the public can and should have a voice as it is their long-term future that is at stake.

There is one final grouping, beyond these core three, that has a critical role to play, if mainly to form and support the views of the other groups, and that is the academic community which must ensure that the results of the SDSR are rigorously examined against long-term, national and international needs.

History offers us some discouraging parallels from former decisions, hence the title of this piece. With the benefit of hindsight it is as surprising as it is distressing that the three organs – Government, Media and the general public, supported by academia – were so supine, so ill-informed surrounding the decision by the US Administration to enter Vietnam in the late 1950s and very early 1960s, while the lack of scrutiny given in this country to participate in the second Gulf War is, as is being made clear in the Chilcot Inquiry, shows that this country is equally capable of failing to examine significant and far-reaching political decisions with due process. While it is too early to predict what Chilcot will conclude, there is ample evidence from all sources – politicians, the media and academics – that America did indeed sleepwalk into Vietnam.

Of course, it can be argued that we have been here before. The decisions on defence and security, through the medium of defence spending, taken in the 1920s and 1930s nearly proved

to be disastrously wrong. There are some parallels with the present time in terms of the economic position, although it must also be acknowledged that the horrors of the Western Front and the impact that the loss of a large proportion of an entire generation of young men had on public, press and parliament make that a different scenario: there are not total similarities. But the view that major war was a least ten years away, and that therefore we would have sufficient time to re-arm, has clear resonance in today's thinking. There are, of course, two obvious questions to be asked against such a scenario: who decides where the threat is coming from, and how do you know that the clock has started ticking? There are, though, two critical differences to the case of the 1920s and 1930s. First, technology makes a big difference. Modern, high-technology weapon systems take many years, even decades to produce (witness, for example, Eurofighter/Typhoon) and cannot readily be mass-produced as were the Spitfires and Lancasters of the Second World War. Moreover, we should acknowledge that as technology spreads faster and more widely across the world, our previously-held technological advantage can no longer be assumed: in some areas we would find ourselves at a technological disadvantage. Second, in an era of Weapons of Mass Destruction (and we should not ignore the spread of nuclear weapons) time is even less on our side: deterrence only works if it is credible and present, not a planning consideration.

All of which may sound like a plea for defence spending to be spared the scale of cut-backs that wider public-spending must face. It is not, but it is a plea for a proper debate. This debate must be centred around a discussion on the role that the UK wishes to play in the world; we retain (despite Gulf War Two) an enviable reputation as upholders of International Law, of the international order, and of natural justice. We exert considerable influence through both hard and soft power, and are still regarded in many quarters as one of the good guys. We remain a trading nation, and it is in our interests that freedom to trade, freedom of the seas and skies, and increasingly of Space and Cyberspace, are maintained. We need a foreign-policy led review of what we, as a nation, wish to be. We should acknowledge the role of the UK Defence Industry and the part that that plays in generating national wealth. But above all we need the time for open, informed, honest, balanced and forward-looking debate. We must avoid the mistakes of the past and ensure that the decisions that will flow from the SDSR are scrutinised for we cannot afford to get these decisions wrong or they will blight a generation – or worse. Le us have the debate, and even if history were to prove that we got it wrong let us at least say that we did not sleepwalk into the outcome.