

The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review stipulated that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) would suffer a 7.7% reduction in its budget in real terms over four years; resulting in the loss of 7,000 Army, 5,000 RAF and 5,000 Royal Navy personnel by 2015. These savings will be reinforced with myriad cuts to defence procurement projects, in an attempt to ensure that British forces are organised both efficiently and cost effectively to meet the future security challenges of the United Kingdom. Combined with the Army 2020 programme of cutbacks, the SDSR has reduced the requirement of high readiness forces that can conduct airborne operations by parachute, or assault operations by aircraft, at short notice. Due to this, the 16th Air Assault Brigade, the UK's elite rapid reaction force will be hit particularly hard by the cuts, losing an estimated 3,000 of its 8,000 troops by the end of the year.

The newly reduced and restructured force will have the Parachute Regiment at its core, supported by two regular Army Air Corps regiments and some supporting units, and be focused on providing one Air Assault Task Force (AATF) that can be mobilised within 72 hours. Only one battalion will make up the AATF at a time. The other two will provide the role on rotation for twelve-month periods, with only one company-sized group of troops providing the parachute role at any time. The cuts will also result in the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment being transferred to a lower-readiness force, and 5 SCOTS of the Royal Regiment of Scotland disbanded, bar one company placed on ceremonial duties and located in Scotland.

Critics to the proposed cuts argue that they cater too much to economic concerns, ignoring future security threats and strategic priorities. There is a fear that the reduced resources of the 16th Air Assault Brigade will hamper Britain's ability to respond quickly and decisively to situations in the future, executing contingency operations when necessary. These concerns were shared by Dan Jarvis MP, who told the Daily Telegraph that he found it, "Baffling that at the point where we start to focus on contingency operations, cuts are being made that will undermine the deployability and combat effectiveness of the brigade".

The cuts outlined in the SDSR, coupled with the £10 billion that has already been pared from the defence budget, will result in manpower levels in the British military soon being at their lowest levels since before the Napoleonic Wars. For some, including Gen Sir Nick Houghton and Col Tim Collins, this will ultimately render the British army a hollow defensive force; unfit to tackle the potential security challenges of coming years. Concerns have also been raised by senior figures within the United States, such as former defence secretary Robert Gates. If the UK's military expenditure falls below NATO's target of 2% of GDP by 2017 as predicted, Mr Gates has claimed that Britain will lose its ability to be as full a partner to the United States as it has been in the past. This role may be further hampered by an over-reliance on reservists that the MOD is struggling to recruit in sufficient numbers. At current recruitment levels, it could take until 2025 before troop levels reach required numbers, putting significant pressure on regular units in the field.

It is however important to be both realistic and pragmatic when analysing defence spending cuts. Reduced budgets are not unique to the military, and ring-fencing one budget will always be to the detriment of another. Any future force orientations must therefore take into account the limitations of diminished resources, including decreased numbers of air transport craft. There is little point maintaining the 8,000 troops of the 16AA for example, if you lack the ability to move them by air. Neither is it likely that the UK will need to deploy such a large number of troops any time soon, especially in the years following the British withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of 2014. It must be remembered, that even with the cuts, the British military budget, according to

the IISS, remains the largest in the EU, with forces that are arguably the best trained and equipped outside of the United States. Although questions must certainly be asked about where cuts should be made, and the most effective methods of utilising them, it serves little purpose arguing for increased resources that do not exist. It is also telling, that a sizable number of individuals calling for renewed spending are those with a clear vested interest in maintaining military expenditure. In contrast, only 7% of the general public surveyed in a June 2014 Ipsos MORI poll considered defence and foreign affairs to be an important issue faced by the United Kingdom.

It is also debateable whether bold military interventions in sovereign nations, of which we will soon be purportedly less able to undertake, serve to improve or harm British security. One must only look at the current situation in Iraq to glimpse the potential repercussions of ill judged military operations abroad. The UK must therefore be far more selective when deciding how best to utilise its limited resources, and where to deploy them. It must be accepted that we can no longer afford to support such a large globally deployable military. Instead, we must concentrate on providing a smaller, yet still capable force that continues to punch well above its weight on the geopolitical stage.

Although elite units such as the Parachute Regiment have a long and illustrious history, one must be pragmatic when considering their role in potential operations in the future. Considering that they have not been utilised in their designated operational role since 1956, it is debateable whether or not it is prudent to maintain a substantial parachute capability. Fundamentally, cuts to any branch of the military are going to be protested by those that they negatively effect. When approaching the issue, we must be realistic in accepting that cuts both will happen, and must happen, if we are to take control of ever-stretched public finances. If approached as positively and constructively as possible, the process offers an opportunity to modernise and restructure our armed forces, providing a more sustainable and efficient military in the future.

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