As the UK approaches the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) there are already concerns being expressed about the process. Professor Sir Hew Strachan is Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford University. He is also the author of The Direction of War which sets contemporary strategy in a historical perspective. He is an advisor to the parliamentary joint committee on National Security Strategy. He recently spoke to Nick Watts, Deputy Director General of the UK Defence Forum.
Prof Strachan began by addressing the perception that Whitehall seems to lack a coherent strategy making process. "Strategy is a continuing process; a means to an end. To make it work properly the process relies on an iterative relationship. The notion that you can set a policy and strategy follows just doesn't work." His remarks are a reflection of the process Whitehall went through in the creation of the 2010 SDSR and how it is now beginning to work on SDSR 2015. He takes the view that Whitehall's approach to the SDSR is 'We set this out in 2010 and now it's all about implementation.' But he notes that "implementation changes what you intended to do. Not through design, but just because the situation might change." The altered force posture changes how things can be done.
To illustrate his point he draws attention to the policy towards the Army Reserve. "The Future Army and Army Reserves are seen as the implementation of the SDSR process. All that was said at the time was that there will be a report on the reserves. The Army itself wasn't covered." The question that follows therefore is 'What does this mean in terms of national strategy?' Strachan explains:" an army of 82,000 regulars (plus reserves) with a different speed of mobilisation means that there are things today that are no longer possible, which could have been done in 2010. This could have a bearing on the National Security Council deliberations on, e g Syria. You need to complete the loop, and ask 'what does this mean in terms of national strategy?'"
"In an ideal world you have NSS first, which asks where does the UK want to go and how do we deliver that." But reality is different. "What is happening in 2014 is what happened in 2009; MOD knows [the SDSR] is coming, starts a whole lot of work, so you start somewhere in the middle. There are currently something like 80 plus work strands going on in MOD; there is no work going on for the NSS. The Prime Minister said that this was a matter for the next government. That might work politically, but in terms of good practice it is useless in terms of continuity."
"So what is happening is change from the bottom up. Some of this work will be redundant as guidance from NSS will suggest other courses of action; some work will have to be rushed and improvised." Strachan recognises a reluctance in Whitehall to see the circular iterative relationship. Government departments that deliver the strategy (MOD, DFID and FCO) have failed to respond to the creation of the National Security Council. "You would have expected that if the NSC now has the lead in making national security, government departments should adjust their working practices to meet the needs of the NSC, but they haven't."
Considering the relationship that should exist between an elected government and crown servants whose job is to implement their policies, Strachan recognises the tensions that can arise, but believes that a more mature relationship between the two sides is better for policy formulation and execution. With regard to national security, Government often wills the ends but does not always supply the means. "There are faults on both sides. One problem for new politicians is the fear that they have long term experts who are going to manipulate them. The value of the generals is their professional expertise. It is a reflection of the weakness of politicians in the relationship, when they say 'don't you tell me, I'll tell you'. There needs to be greater confidence on the part of politicians. Both sides shouldn't be frightened of difference." The obvious example is that of the relationship between Churchill and Alanbrooke, which was in

exceptional circumstances. Strachan believes that it is not helpful that politicians speak and the military just implement; "this is not good for the iterative relationship."
Aside from the process, the bigger question arises; what will the UK's strategy actually be? Has UK Strategic policy become too driven by a need to be useful to the US? "It was not self-evident in the SDR of 1998 that UK defence policy was subservient to the US. The UK planned to work in coalition, but the strategy still allowed independent actions. The orientation was much more towards Europe, with the St Malo agreement." Following 9/11 • George Robertson having been the Secretary of State who pushed the SDR through, now as Secretary General of NATO, said that the Alliance supported the US; Blair also supported the US. What happened between 2003 and 2010 was that British foreign policy was predicated on supporting the US, rather than thinking of what was in the interests of Britain. Strachan recalls speaking to senior defence officials in Whitehall during this period who told him that 'Strategy was made in the USA'. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan became unpopular, this was increasingly questioned.
Strachan believes that the big issue for both the NSS and the SDSR in 2015 will be the nature of the UK's relationship with the US. If the US is pivoting to Asia, does the UK follow? There are good reasons why this would make sense, as a good Commonwealth partner; or do we take up the slack in the Mediterranean and the Gulf left by the departure of US forces? This latter course works for both the US and the UK. Strachan notes that this is already happening under the radar. "The UK has been east of Suez for the past 10 years, but there has been no public discussion of what is effectively a reversal of the biggest defence policy decision made since 1945. One question for the NSS is what areas of the world are we interested in. If we don't have this discussion we risk stretching thin forces even thinner."
Strachan believes that it would be Logical to identify threats in North Africa as being relevant to the UK's national security interest, but smaller forces can't be everywhere. Strachan believes that this brings policy makers back to the question of what their priorities are. "The challenge of this is the creation of mass. Modern forces are more potent in their delivery of firepower than ever before; if you are fighting on a high intensity battlefield, that means you can have effects with fewer people, but if you want to create a presence across the world then you need more people, or the capacity to generate more people. There is a mismatch between what we are trying to do and the manpower to do it."
Ultimately, the armed forces are the guarantor of national security. They must be prepared to engage in high intensity state-on-state war. Strachan believes the first question must be 'what would a deployed military force look like?' In the Cold War the question for the British army was: can it command at Corps level? Now it is: could we generate a Division in under a year?
The UK could engage in such a war as part of a wider organisation; NATO has been able to generate mass and manage operational integration. "If you think who is ready to undertake operations, then because of recent experience in the Ukraine and before that in South Ossetia and Georgia, it is Russia." Strachan observes that the Russian military is able to get ready very quickly. This poses a problem for the UK if it believes that it will have time to 'get ready'. "Russia gets people on the ground, and it's difficult to work out who are the insurgents from outside and who are local partisans; this is old Cold War practice." Speed of response matters.
Regarding the intelligence picture, and the related matter of strategic warning, there is a risk that efforts to counter terrorism have taken focus away from an examination of the capabilities and intentions of competing powers. "Russia's interest in Crimea was not a surprise, so why are we shocked?" Strachan believes that there has to be a balance between covert sources of intelligence and open sources. The attraction of focusing on covert sources can lead you to overlook the

blindingly obvious. "Putin understood the opportunity and was ready to exploit it when it presented itself." Part of having a good strategy is how quickly you can exploit opportunities.
Strachan believes that the UK should begin any strategic analysis by thinking about its geography; "the first priority should be the UK, Europe and adjacent waters. Instead of which we begin 'out there' and work inwards." Considering whether the UK still has any global credibility based on 'influence' and soft power, Strachan points to France," which has chosen to operate in areas where they have local knowledge. 'Soft power' has become unhelpful "having a common language in English does not in itself equate to soft power. Real power doesn't have to be military; it could be economic. If soft power was the answer we wouldn't be dealing with indigenous terrorism. The U S has suffered no diminution of its soft power over the last 10 15 years; what has undermined its authority is the way it has used its hard power."