



In the same week that France was dealing with the Nice Basilica terror killings and UK Labour suspended Jeremy Corbyn in the wake of the EHRC report findings, an important and insightful paper by Britain's leading defence think tank could have been missed. The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) published a paper by its Deputy Director General Professor Malcolm Chalmers. The paper offers a sharp and sensible summary of the implications arising from the deferral of the original timetable for a comprehensive spending review.

The tag line A Reckoning Postponed is indeed powerful, comments Noel Hadjimichael. Professor Chalmers spares the reader no illusions that the UK government's decision carries no serious implications for planners, leaders or strategists.

"The government's decision to abandon its plans for a multi-year Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) has thrown its plans for the Integrated Review into disarray. For defence, this will be especially costly, as key decisions on long-term defence priorities may now have to wait until a full CSR, in 2021 or 2022."

The very same week, many RUSI members would have received in the post Whitehall Paper no 96. A hard-hitting set of individual papers setting out the tough questions being asked of middle power militaries as they seek to balance the desire to deliver capabilities whilst confronted by technological advances and economic constraints. The failure to align resources and ambitions since 2010 have exacerbated tensions arising from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, let alone present-day pressures created by pandemic, grey zone warfare or Brexit.

Land forces are struggling with the demands of cyber and emerging electromagnetic weaponry. Sea power is being challenged by swarm technology and air power looks to space as a new domain to conquer. At a time when liberal democracies are spending vast sums on economic and health measures, the defence sector's demands for fresh spending and investment of commitment is likely to come into conflict with taxpayers, voters and the broader civil society commentariat. There are few allies or advocates seemingly prepared to push hard for clear funding priorities when politicians are floundering with track and trace, border control or preservation of employment.

Professor Chalmer places significant focus on the centrality of major procurement decisions. Both the UK's Future Combat Air System and its Future Nuclear Warhead System are

mentioned as desired 2040 deliverables that require urgent strategic thinking over the next 5 years. Delay, postponement and dithering by government have huge effects on the pipeline process to bring projects to fruition at the right time to ensure no gaps in capability or force projection.

One prominent example of current ambitions liable to be thwarted is the desire for political, foreign policy and defence reasons to deploy the Queen Elizabeth class carriers into the Indo-Pacific region. The pressure from Treasury and non-defence stakeholders for Britain's global strategies to be affordable and cost efficient may lead to heightened discussions as to the role partners like the Gulf States, India or Australia might play to facilitate deployment "on the cheap". Forward operating bases may not be possible unless the UK accepts some generous offer from friendly or allied states seeking to have UK defence assets in their backyard. Pride may need to be checked.

Whilst drawing attention to the risks, Professor Chalmers does strike a positive note: The UK can expect to remain one of the world's eight biggest defence spenders in 2030, if we make the necessary decisions over the forthcoming 12-18 months. We might be dwarfed by the US and China but will continue to remain on par with our middle power friends France, Germany and Japan.

The United Kingdom can remain committed to being in the select group of countries who possess both a carrier strike capability and a powerful globally deployable SSN force. It will remain a nuclear weapon state, with new investments ensuring that it remains in the game for future decades, and that its force is protected against potential threats. It will deploy some of the best frigates and destroyers in the world, even as it increases investment in the newer domains of space and cyber. It will be one of only a very few countries that retains national capabilities for the development and production of new generations of combat aircraft, nuclear-powered submarines and leading-edge missiles. In addition, we seem set to maintain our forces at a state of operational readiness that remains relatively high compared with most of our European allies.

2020 has triggered a deferral of important decisions. Failure next year will be costly.

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The RUSI Paper A Reckoning Postponed? The Defence Arithmetic of the Integrated Review by Professor Malcolm Chalmers (October 2020) can be downloaded at <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/reckoning-postponed-defence-arithmetic-integrated-review>